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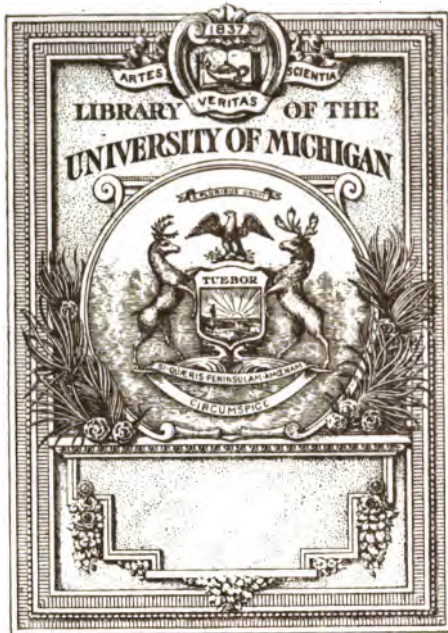
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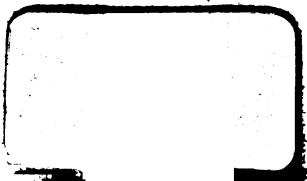
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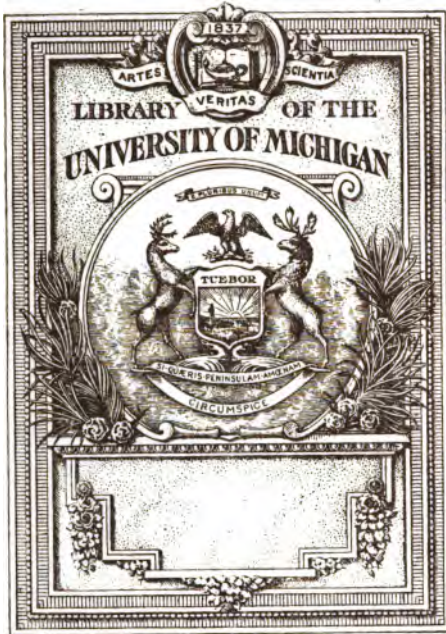
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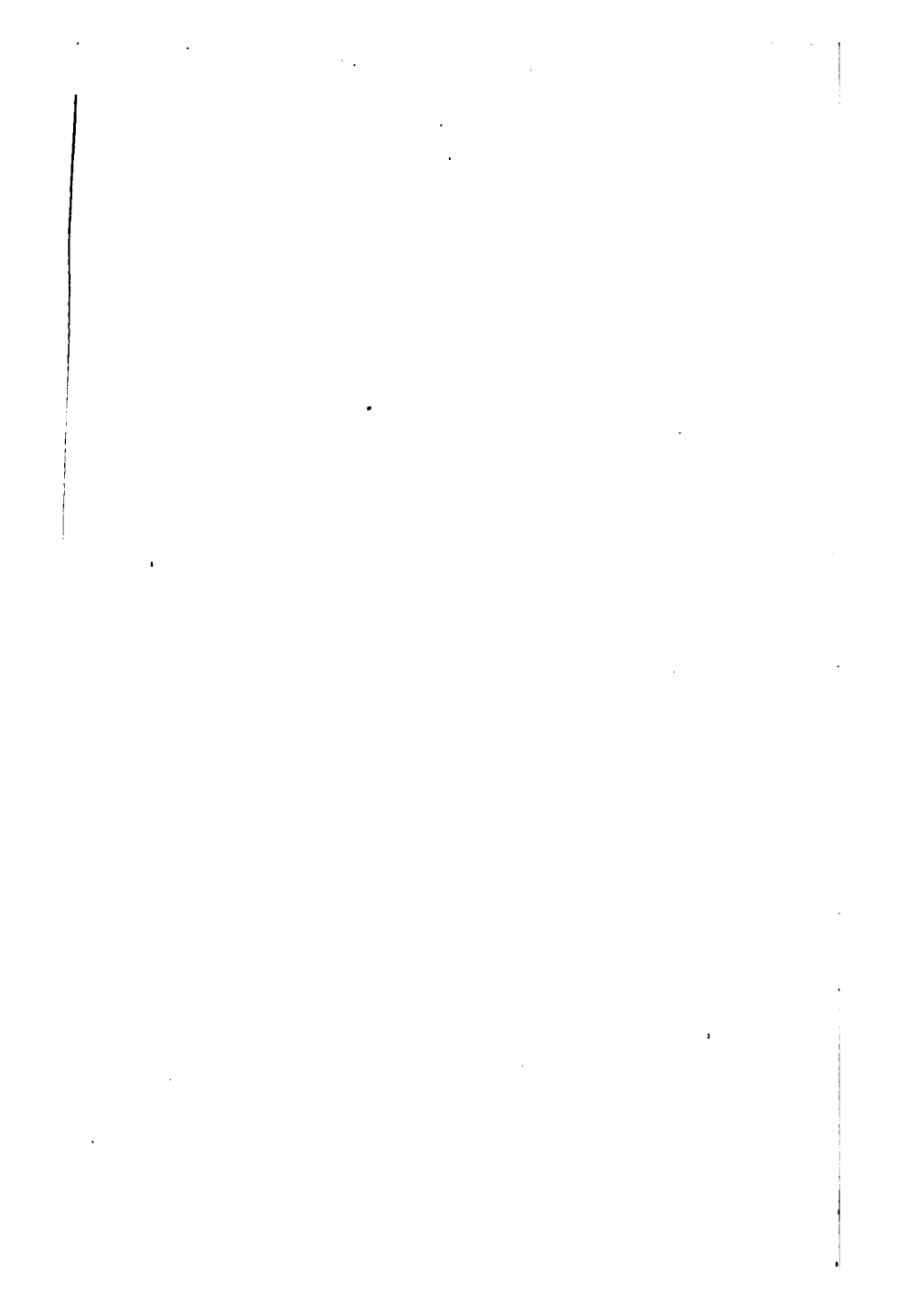


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CATHERINE'S COQUETRIES

A Tale of French Country Life



BY

CAMILLE DEBANS

TRANSLATED BY LEON MEAD

ILLUSTRATED

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CATHERINE'S COQUETRIES.

A TALE OF FRENCH PEASANT LIFE.

CHAPTER I.

A GAME THAT ENDS BADLY.

"BRAVO, Sidonie !"

"Ah, but he escapes her, the scamp !"

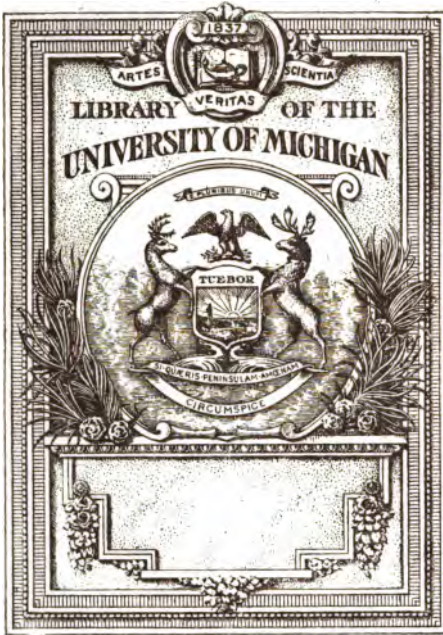
Thus shout the spectators as they watch a poor young lame girl chase, with all her energy, a young fellow of two and twenty, who makes all possible effort to elude her.

Sidonie's right hand clasps an important adjunct of the homely game—a little cluster of red raspberries. In the absorbed ardor of pursuit the "Little Crook," as they call her, holds it quite mechanically, and from her tightly clinched fingers trickle drops of the crimson juice as she runs.

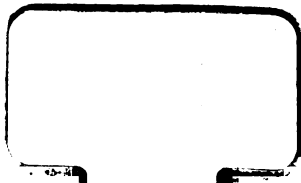
"Good, little one, good," cries the little old man, who is highly amused at the endeavors of the unfortunate lame girl.

Sidonie makes a fresh start—this time determined to catch the fugitive. The aspect of the afflicted girl as she hobbles about on limbs of unequal length does not

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his side walks a queer little being, with uneven steps, misshapen body, short, twisted legs, and enormous arms. Both stop to watch the game—the first like a man who cannot be induced to enter into any such frivolous pastime; the other like a man incapable of doing so by reason of his poor physique.

“Good-morning, Andoche,” salutes Catherine as she passes the deformed little man, who smiles with a wry, disagreeable face.

“Good-morning, Madame Catherine,” he returns, with a look of malice in his eyes. Then turning to the other he remarks, “You will see how she will manage to invite you to join in.”

Bruno, running at a swift pace, passes before the newcomers. The young woman, making a sudden *detour*, again approaches them, and asks in a voice of admirable nonchalance :

“Would you not like to play for a while, Monsieur Firmin ?”

“Ah, what did I tell you ?” exclaims Andoche, bursting into laughter.

“Will you be one of us ?” continues the young woman.

“I do not know the game, but I will play,” responds Firmin.

Catherine, by an adroit manœuvre, leads the waiting Bruno to one side and smilingly makes him a sign. He throws himself upon Firmin and besmears his face with berry juice. Firmin's surprise quickly curdles into anger. Like a giant he resents the treatment, but it is quite unnecessary for him to give poor Bruno such a resistless blow. Advancing to interpose hasten Rosalie, Félicité, Suzanne, Justine, Nicholas, Mathieu, Con-

stant, and others. Firmin has not time to give a second blow. He strikes out only once, but that is quite sufficient.

Catherine briefly explains the nature of the game. During her explanation the jeering Andoche regards her insolently, and when she has finished he observes : "It is not a proper or neat game for Sunday, when one is quite clean and fresh."

"And now," continues Catherine, coolly, paying no heed to the sneer of Andoche, "it is your turn to run after some one, and decorate her face if you catch her."

"I will, then, run after you," declares this young Antinous, rather stupidly.

"How foolish !" exclaims the disagreeable Andoche. "If you expect to catch Madame Catherine, you will have to double your speed."

Firmin does not notice the evil slur in the old man's suggestion. As soon as he dashes forth, all seek to evade him.

Catherine, blushing a little in spite of herself, leaves the open glade and gains the forest. In two or three long strides Firmin might overtake her, but she is too quick for him, because she darts first to the right and then to the left so skilfully that the great fellow, each time going as straight as an arrow, overleaps her by several feet and so loses her, much to the amusement of the others.

"What a goose !" grumbles that beast of an Andoche. "She will lead as far as you care to follow her."

Though the beautiful Catherine is evidently fatigued, Firmin cannot catch her. Now she disappears from view behind the raspberry hedges, some minutes perhaps elapsing before she and her pursuer are again

seen. Sometimes the gamekeeper's wife reappears with a little grimace on her face, for the game begins to pall. The cries of enthusiasm cease.

But Catherine remains indefatigable. Old Andoche continues to jeer, and finally in his garrulous, cynical voice cries : " How interesting it would be should Monsieur Barrau happen to pass this way ! He might not be altogether pleased at the sight. "

Scarcely has Andoche finished speaking when through the trees they see the gleam of a musket. The branches are pushed aside, and a man clad in velvet, with long gaiters extending from his knees, makes his appearance, followed by a dog which as he bounds to and fro barks joyously.





CHAPTER II.

THE ALTERCATION.

SAVIN BARRAU was naturally a soldier. As Catherine was a beautiful woman, so was Savin a distinguished-looking man. His regular-featured face wore an expression of hauteur and valor, as though he often had stood in the face of death. But upon his lips one could have fancied there lurked a smile both touching and tender. His handsome dark eyes brightened his face to an extraordinary degree. Brave and noble he seemed as he stood gazing upon the scene.

"Ah, ha," said the vindictive Andoche, "I have brought trouble to our charming Madame Catherine with my remarks, I fear. Another time I shall hold my tongue."

Savin approached, carrying his gun in his left hand. His dog Patachaut was still bounding at his side. A feeling of restlessness possessed the crowd, hitherto so joyous. A jealous glitter suddenly came into Barrau's eyes. He could not disguise his disapproval of his wife's frivolity.

Every one thought Catherine would discontinue the game and run to meet him. But no. Either bravado or the testy consciousness of her virtue led her to continue it. Firmin, who as yet had not perceived Barrau,

darted after her with increased zest. The gamekeeper came forward with even tread.

"Ah, some game seems to be in progress," said he as he halted.

His wife and Firmin now disappeared from view. A look of displeasure clouded Savin's features. With a military gesture he rested his hand on his knee. The dog continuing to leap upon him, he shouted: "Down, Patachaud, down, sir!" a little rudely.

A profound silence enveloped the scene. Every one was impressed, for all knew the keeper's mood. Why indeed should the coquettish Catherine so vex her brave husband? Presently she again came in sight. Merrily she went toward Savin, smiled up at him, and seizing his shoulders swung around him, without a thought of abandoning the game.

Certainly Savin's look of displeasure should have warned her to desist, but that look she obstinately refused to see. Fortified by her husband's tall figure, Catherine stood panting and laughing, while Firmin foolishly advanced toward her in pursuit.

At this juncture, the gamekeeper, impatiently tapping the ground with his foot, exclaimed: "Come, come! this is a little too bold."

"Now for a storm," murmured Andoche. "Firmin would have passed the time better by drinking a couple of glasses of beer with me."

Firmin stupidly stared at Barrau, with an air of indifference; while Catherine, vexed at Savin's interference, addressed him brusquely in these words: "Well, what are you going to do about it?"

"Not much. You have played too long. You must go and rest."

"But we have not yet gathered the berries."

"Well, let the others do that. Come, let us go."

"Oh, no, indeed," said Catherine, perversely. "You may go on if you like, but I——"

"Come along, Catherine. Do not provoke me."

A hard look entered her eyes. To be led away before everybody appeared to her, at that moment, the acme of humiliation. It was wiser to concede to her husband's wishes, she well knew, for he loved her ardently, and had only her welfare at heart. But she did not wish to seem so meek before her friends. Indeed, she would show them that she was not to be bullied.

"It would have been surprising had you not come to spoil all our sport. But, as I said before, you may go. I shall remain longer."

"Poor little one," said Andoche, hatefully.

The gamekeeper's wife turned toward a group of peasants, some of whom were regarding her approvingly, others with displeasure.

"Catherine," said Barrau, in vibrating tones, "I am the master, you understand, and never shall I submit to being laughed at by a Firmin."

"Pooh! You always see evil in everything. Am I doing wrong? Whenever I try to enjoy myself you are angry. In order to please you, I ought always to stay at home. But I don't care for that sort of life—not I."

"Come!"

"No."

Savin was visibly disturbed. His resolute face looked pained. He said nothing, but going straight up to his wife, he took her by the arm and forced her to go by his side. Vexed with rage, she attempted to free herself, but in vain. Her husband held her closely.

But rather than go with him she fell to the ground, sobbing.

"Catherine, my girl, come," urged Savin, more gently. "Do not be a baby; come willingly. People are mocking at us."

Did the young woman believe her husband would weaken? Or did she think it dramatic to make a scene? Who knows? At all events, she raised her hand to strike her husband on the face, when he, foreseeing the intention, arrested the blow. His movement was so rapid that he did not realize what strength he exerted in seizing her fingers. Held as firmly as though she were in a vice, Catherine uttered a little cry of pain.

"You hurt me, Savin. See! You hurt me!"

But the gamekeeper, swayed by his anger, did not listen to her complaint.

"A blow!" cried he. "You wished to strike me—you! Before all these people!"

Catherine reiterated her complaint.

"Be quiet," said her husband, in tones of thunder. "Do not forget that I am Savin Barrau. You will have cause to remember this twentieth of July. Ask my pardon!"

At these words Catherine made another effort to release herself from his grasp, but Savin held her all the more firmly.

"Apologize, I tell you!"

"I will not!"

Pride overcame her pain. Her arm was aching terribly, but—she would never yield. Drops of perspiration stood on her forehead. Her heart within her seemed to stop beating. Though ready to faint, she

still would have resisted, but her suffering was too great.

"Pardon me," she cried, at length, in a grieved voice.

"You will not do so again?" demanded Savin, severely.

"No, no. Release me!"

"You will never again do so rude a thing?"

"No. Oh, how you hurt me!"

Savin dropped her arm and pushed her toward the pathway.

"Come, let us go," said he.

Catherine, humiliated and angry, did not resist. Without once turning her head, Madame Barrau walked away, bewildered and wretched.

No one had thought of interfering between the man and wife. Country people, as a rule, have great respect for strength and authority. Savin's behavior seemed to them quite the natural sequence of Catherine's.

A profound silence reigned for several minutes. By tacit consent all waited until the gamekeeper and his wife were beyond hearing, and then soon enough each tongue began to wag. Catherine was very pretty, and therefore could not escape calumny. More than one venomous smile was to be seen on the lips of her enemies.

"Did you see what a look she gave him when they started?"

"And how vexed she was because he came?"

"She could have strangled him," said Andoche, wickedly.

"Poor Barrau! how sad!"

Bruno alone was silent. Now and then he opened his mouth as though he had something to say, but he

closed it again without speaking. Amid the babble Firmin ventured a word. He had been a valet in Paris, and more than one pretty chambermaid had smiled upon him: so he felt himself to be quite a squire of dames.

"Madame Barrau is such a fine-looking woman that her husband ought to be satisfied if—if—don't you know?"

Every one save Bruno burst into laughter. He turned pale, clinched his fists, and muttered something to himself. Finally he said with vehemence, as he planted himself before Firmin: "You are a scoundrel. You, at least, have no right to say anything. I repeat, you are a scoundrel!"

"Ah, my dear fellow, how excited you are!"

"You know very well that Madame Catherine is an honest woman. I will answer for it, and I forbid you to say a word to the contrary."

"You forbid me! You forbid me!" retorted Firmin, pale and exasperated. "And what if I laugh in your face?"

"I will break your head as I would a cat's," cried Bruno, more and more enraged.

"Ah, ha!" said Andoche, in his maddening way: "*you* are then in love with Madame Catherine?"

"I also forbid you to speak like that, Andoche. Indeed, one ought never to allow drunkards in company."

He must be a hot-brained fellow to speak like that—this young Bruno.

Fair-skinned, slight, graceful, and blond, the son of Mother Mathurine would have been taken anywhere for a gentleman. But he could not boast that strength of limb and muscle which distinguished the young fellows

with whom he had often come in contact, and who were always ready for a quarrel.

Firmin was as strong as an ox, and Andoche, the old blacksmith, had sinews of steel. Young Bruno could hardly expect to enter the lists with either, and he was rather foolhardy to challenge a dispute. Firmin and Andoche Grignon were both well enough settled in life, in a pecuniary way ; while young Bruno was but the son of a poor mother, who passed as a good woman, though his father had insisted upon remaining away from home for over twenty years.

Bruno's last remark lent a sharp piquancy to the situation. The women were quite elated at the prospect of a dispute ; while the men crowded around, fearing lest they should lose a word. Andoche frowned and his face assumed an ugly expression. He never hesitated to give a blow, and his two short arms had a terrible reputation at Quarré, Rouvray, and Trinquelin.

"Who ever saw such an insolent cur ?" said he, livid with rage.

For an answer Bruno struck his fist full upon the fat, red face of the stupefied Andoche. The blacksmith, for such he was, in his ill-fitting clothes, stood gaping, with his mouth and eyes wide open—struck dumb for a moment by the young man's temerity. Had he been inebriated, as was often the case, he would not have hesitated. But now he seemed half afraid, until Firmin's jeering voice goaded him to violence.

"Good heavens !" roared Andoche, desperately, "take that !" And he planted a cruel blow upon Bruno's chest. Poor Bruno ! he fell in a heap upon the grass. Andoche, making the most of his advantage, then leaped upon his adversary. The unfortunate fellow, brave to the last,

rose to his knees only to receive another stinging blow. Firmin, meanwhile, showed himself the coward by urging the blacksmith to greater violence. Andoche again furiously seized the young man by the throat and would have strangled him, but for a new-comer, a man brawny and wiry, who stepped forward, suddenly took the blacksmith himself by the throat and pressed him so hard that, muttering a cry of pain, he relaxed his hold upon Bruno and tried to get away.

"The Bear!" he cried, in a stifled voice. He scarcely found himself released, when in a spasm of rage Bruno's adversary started to punish the man who had interfered. But the tables were turned. With no great effort "the Bear" took Andoche between his iron hands, raised and hurled him to the ground. A stronger man than Andoche was master of the field.

"It is cowardly," said he, "to beat a fellow like that. Andoche, let Firmin and Bruno settle the dispute. Bruno is courageous, and Firmin is cowardly. That statement is but just. But you! I should have thought you more honorable!"

"What a shock you gave me!" pitifully cried Andoche, who had no desire to prolong the fight.

"What caused the row? Bruno is not the lad to be incensed for nothing."

"They were doubting the purity of Madame Catherine," said Bruno.

"The gamekeeper's wife?" queried "the Bear," with some agitation.

"Yes, Madame Barrau, if you please."

"Well, well," said "the Bear," with an assumed nonchalance. Then after a slight pause he added: "It is none of my affair. But if again I catch you attacking

a man like little Bruno, Andoche, I will dash you to pieces."

The blacksmith, remembering his last lesson, hung his head and said nothing.

"Bruno, my lad, come with me," said "the Bear," as he turned to go. But Bruno did not wish to retreat under another's protection like a coward.

"No, thank you," he said : "I will remain."

"So be it," returned "the Bear." "Man is a free agent."

And the shaggy-haired, strongly built man shambled away without asking if Andoche intended to renew the fight, which was far from Andoche's wish. He had received a lesson. The women, however, continued to score and revile Catherine. Said one old gossip : "Well, that fool of a Savin has no more than he deserves. When a man marries he ought not to choose a girl who is neither a peasant nor a lady."

"Come, come !" said Bruno, irritably.

"Ah, ha ! you are sensitive on the subject, eh ?"

But the interest in the discussion soon flagged, and presently they began to pick berries.





CHAPTER III.

THE CORNER OF THE WOOD.

UNDER arches of foliage made beautiful by an occasional stray gleam of sunshine, Savin and Catherine walked homeward in silence.

With tears trickling down her cheeks and suffusing her long eyelashes, the young woman put one foot before the other like an automaton, and saw nothing but the black earth under her feet. She took no notice of the trees and blossoming flowers, of the delicate blue gentians that fringed the path, of the soothing peace of nature.

At any other time Catherine would have gloried in the picture. The sylvan verdure, the fragrant air, the exquisite landscape had always appealed to her sense of the beautiful. But now, with downcast eyes, she cared not for the charming spectacle.

Savin, too, was an ardent admirer of nature, and he passionately loved the grand old forest. But now, jealous and discontented, he walked moodily along, while Patachaud, leaping by his side, in vain pleaded for attention.

For a long time Barrau and his wife proceeded without speaking, each keeping to his or her own path and brooding over the sorrowful situation. And yet how

charming they were—she with her raven hair and lustrous dark eyes, straight aquiline nose, and perfect mouth; and he, a man of thirty-two, with the carriage of a soldier, and a strong intellectual face, a rich deep voice, and skin bronzed by the summer sun. A blond mustache gave to his face a look which the French are accustomed to trace back to their ancestors the Gauls. Certainly there could not have been found in all the countryside two handsomer persons than Savin and Catherine. Faithfully and fondly, too, had they loved each other, and until now had been happy. But a little coquetry and ardent love for pleasure on the one hand, and jealousy on the other, had spoiled it all, and—who could tell?—might lead to the direst misery.

Barrau did not know how imprudent it is for a man to take the conceit out of a pretty woman, and Catherine did not realize how hard it is to attempt to dissuade a strong man from what he considers right.

And so they, at length, reached the border of the wood—she ruminating upon vengeance, and he almost tragically annoyed by the thought that they had given cause for scandal to the gossips they had left behind.

Finally, the path became more devious, and as they advanced the magnificent beauty of the scene burst upon them. Through an opening in the trees the sun burned like a ball of fire. From every hand were wafted strains of rapturous melody. Thousands of feathered songsters were joining in one grand chorus of praise to God.

Affected in spite of himself, Savin's face became more gentle, while Catherine's softened almost to tenderness. But the moment of possible reconciliation passed, and home was reached.

Upon a small bluff, half hidden by trees, stood a cosey

little cottage, built of wood and brick. As if conscious of its modest architectural pretensions, the *chalet* was quite enveloped in a network of clematis and woodbine, and a rustic veranda afforded a picturesque effect to the tiny villa. Behind it the forest plunged into a vast ravine, at the bottom of which brawled a little brook among the rocks. The mid-day sunlight beat upon the *façade* of the cottage and radiantly glinted the leaves of the surrounding trees, among which a dozen or more poplars extended a grateful shade over the little garden.

Catherine and Savin did not linger without, but entered the house together. The former, throwing upon the table the fichu she had worn, seated herself by the open window and began nervously tapping the floor with her foot.

A quarrel seemed imminent. Once more in their own home Catherine knew her husband would cease to be vehement. Barrau seated himself on one side of the table and watched Patachaud as he eagerly drank a cup of water which was always ready for him. Two strangers passed by, remarking on the flowers which covered the cottage roof.

At length, Barrau rose from his chair and broke the silence by saying: "We must have dinner now, Catherine."

"You are hungry, then," said she, with reproach. "Well, then, go and eat. I do not prevent you. Surely in order to keep so *strong* as you are, you must eat heartily."

Her words cut him to his soul's quick.

"Do not be rebellious, Catherine. Come, now."

She bounded to her feet and bent upon him her flashing eyes.

"It is I who am wrong, then. I am the culprit, eh? You strike me, and then call me rebellious. Indeed, I ought to rebel, and for good, too."

"Catherine," said Savin severely.

"Ah, why did I marry a common brutal soldier?"

Barrau blushed. The thrust struck home.

"Enough! Enough!" said he, rudely; "I am the master here, at least. And any honest woman should not make such a remark."

"Indeed! I am a worthless jade, am I? A coquette? A good-for-nothing?"

Savin made an impatient gesture.

"Say it," she went on; "do not hesitate."

As though to prevent further disagreement, Savin started to go, but his anger forced him to stop and say: "Ah, well, yes. Yes, then! A woman who compromises herself in the presence of evil tongues has no self-respect."

"Take care!" cried Catherine, advancing toward him in anger.

"Take care yourself, my child. Do your duty and be circumspect is all I ask. But no more coquetry, you understand, or——"

"Or—you will kill me, perhaps. Well, then, do it. Kill me, if you will."

"Madame," said he, solemnly, "I do not come from a family of assassins."

Catherine's face turned livid. She fell heavily to the floor, and Savin could have bitten his tongue out for his cruel words.



CHAPTER IV.

THE STAMPEDE.

THREE weeks later. The annual cattle show at St. Benoit is about to open. St. Benoit is the great region for fine cattle in France. From miles around the farmers and peasants assemble to exhibit the beasts they have fattened to sell in Paris at a reasonable profit.

Every road is crowded. Oxen, cows, and sheep fill the thoroughfares and byways, and the quaint rural habitations are gaily decorated with flags and streamers. Not a drop of rain has fallen since the famous day of the raspberry *fête*, and each morning the sun has risen in the east with more scorching radiance.

The large hamlet of St. Benoit, perfectly suited to such a fair, is crowded in spite of its size. As the sun climbs above the horizon, the cattle accumulate in greater numbers. The peasants are in the best of good spirits, and talk is heard and laughter rings on all sides. Perhaps the buyers are treated with rather more deference than the sellers, but those who come neither to buy nor to sell address themselves to the various schemes of pleasure. The fair is for everybody, and, at all events, it offers an admirable opportunity to "eat, drink, and be merry."

The two public houses of the place are not without guests, and the respective landlords are gathering in a

goodly supply of the *sine qua non* of life and not stopping to count the centimes. More than one young rascal, with nothing to sell and no money to buy, finds his way to the village inn and does not leave there thirsty. Among this class are two men who make more noise than all the rest, and who await the inevitable fistic encounter with interest. One of them is Andoche the blacksmith, an expert in his trade, but still more skilful in spoiling wine by drinking it.

As he sits just outside the door of the public house, at one of the tables, he appears ill at ease. In the rural portions of France people do not like to drink conspicuously, but in Paris it is different. The peasant, conscious that he might better spend his money in some other direction, prefers to take his libations under cover or behind a screen. To get tipsy is all well enough, he thinks; but it is not necessary that the whole world should witness the process from start to finish.

At length, Andoche and his friend proceed to the fair-grounds, not because they prefer to do so, but for the very simple reason that Jeanrobert, the landlord, will not trust either for another centime's worth. Andoche cannot hope to find another man so generous as Fadard, with whom he has taken his last tipple. Fadard is either an old man who seems to have petrified in his youth, or a young man who too soon has been claimed by a precocious old age. Fadard does not belong in the town, but everybody knows him, for several times in the course of a year he comes to pay his respects—as he claims—to one Léocadia Faillot, who passes as his cousin. Evil tongues, like those of Rosalie and Victoire, make up all sorts of stories in regard to them; but they really do Mlle. Faillot an injustice. The fact

is, this dried-up old young or young old man is actually a *relative*, who only comes to see her to borrow money now and then.

In the centre of the market-place, the Mayor, a large, solemn old man, stands talking with four or five equally aged citizens. He is a hardy old man of eighty-five years, strong as an oak, straight as a classic marble pillar, but avaricious, penurious, and cunning in the extreme. He owes his administrative position alone to his skilful management in once conducting a herd of cattle through the circuitous pathways of Forêt-au-Duc. A more truly imposing sight than that of the sturdy old man driving his oxen, and making them obey with a simple touch of the lash, could scarcely be found. As he stands near the cattle, suddenly a refractory bull, seizing his opportunity, lowers his horns as if to strike.

"Pardon me, Father Jerome," speaks a voice behind him at this moment, "but, at your age, a blow from a bull would be an ugly present."

"It is you, then, Savin, my boy. Thanks for your caution. And how is Madame Catherine to-day?"

Savin's face takes on a glowering look.

"For good health, my wife has no equal," he replies, evasively.

"Well, well, that is certainly a blessing. But does she remain as indifferent?"

"There is no change, good father," answered Savin, sadly.

Madame Barrau herself now joins the group, and so the subject is dropped. While they greet Catherine with due courtesy, it is plain to see that a barrier divides the husband and wife. Catherine remains but a moment, and then excuses herself to speak with an ac-

quaintance. As for Savin, he waits an instant after her departure, and then turning upon his heel walks away in an opposite direction.

"Noble fellow," observes the Mayor, as Savin disappears from view. "I fear he has made a bitter mistake."

"What! In marrying D'Angerolles's daughter?"

"Yes."

"How so?"

"Opinions differ as to that. Some say he loved her in secret for many months, while that sot of an Andoche declares that he was caught in a trap."

"She is not the wife for him, that is certain."

"Be that as it may, he has been captured by the fair Catherine. How—nobody knows."

"Ah, but somebody knows," insists Parjeau, with emphasis.

"Who?"

"Why, Andoche, to be sure. He is coming this way. Shall I call him?"

"Yes, on condition that he is sober. When in his cups he respects neither man nor beast."

Celestin Parjeau beckons to the blacksmith, but the latter, fearing lest he lose a chance to gain another "smile," pretends not to see the signal. One of the little urchins playing near by is sent to bring him, and so Andoche is obliged to join them.

"The gamekeeper," he begins, "you want to know about him? A very delicate subject to discuss, because one cannot speak openly. The army teaches us two great duties. One is never to imbibe spirituous liquors to excess, and the other is to be generous in dealing with all questions of sentiment, especially where a woman is concerned, and practically to say nothing.

I am a soldier and have had experience in those things."

"You are drunk again," remarks the Mayor, candidly.

"I? Indeed, no! You may place Parjeau there in my arms, and I will carry him straight as a die to the post road."

"Well, if you are not intoxicated, you at least are talking nonsense—cheap nonsense."

"But I have more to say."

"Well, proceed, but be quick about it."

"You were speaking of Savin, eh? A man who is the soul of honor, and generous, too, by the saints. Being a serjeant-major he knows the world as it stands. He has seen service, too, and——"

"To the point," cry his hearers, impatiently.

"Ah, well, why pursue the subject? You all know D'Angerolles's story."

"Yes. He was suspected of shooting——"

"Suspected?"

"Yes, Andoche. It was but a mere suspicion."

"They found old Martin dead on his doorstep. D'Angerolles had passed by only twenty-five minutes before, with his gun on his shoulder, and as a report was heard but a moment previous to his quitting the mill, you understand, it looked more than suspicious."

"But, Andoche, D'Angerolles had no motive or object in killing Martin."

"Vengeance is strong."

"But he never said a word against the old man."

"That counts for nothing."

"But how is Savin concerned?"

"True—I had forgotten. Savin, full of sympathy and kind-heartedness, took D'Angerolles's part in the

affair and bravely upheld him from beginning to end. Nobody could speak aught against Catherine's father before him."

"Did he love her at that time?"

"It appears not. But her youth, after her father's death, appealed to him. She was all alone and unprotected from the taunts of malevolent persons who went so far as to call her the daughter of an assassin. None spoke to her save to insult her, and her life was wretched. Poor child! She cried day and night. Somebody advised her to go away—to Paris—where no questions would be asked. But Savin came to the rescue. He learned how cruelly people were talking about her and he was incensed. He picked many a quarrel on her account. Among others Rosalie did not hesitate to calumniate Mademoiselle d'Angerolles and to insinuate that between her and Savin too intimate relations existed. At this Barrau was furious, of course, and the upshot of it all was that he protected Catherine by making her his wife. Nobody now dares to say a word. But it was a queer thing, after all. Had she been a peasant, it would have seemed different. But her father was a gentleman, and it appears she has no common talent for learning."

"That is nothing derogatory to her character, my friend."

"No, but we do not live like Parisians here. A different *ménage* might better please the haughty Catherine."

"Pshaw! Her lot should be a happy one."

"Come, come," breaks out Andoche, "let us drink to our Mayor's health."

"Thanks, thanks, Andoche; but none for me, if you please."

"Upon my invitation? I beg you will not refuse," returns Andoche, with mock politeness. "As a soldier and gentleman, however, I will have the grace to excuse you should you insist."

The Mayor, Parjeau, and others refuse, and the blacksmith turns to join his companion, Fadard. The fair progresses, the business transactions being concluded with more celerity as the heat becomes more intense. The sun tortures the animals like the close heat of a furnace fire. Those that by fortunate chance are near wells or ponds can leap in and cool themselves in the water, but the rest—that is to say, ninety per cent. of them—raise their parched heads toward heaven as if seeking some rain-cloud to refresh themselves. Besides, the flies, the mosquitoes, and especially the gnats exasperate them to desperation.

There is perhaps no person on the face of the earth more invulnerable to the sun's rays than the French peasant. To-day, however, there is a general admission that it is intolerably hot. Some, fearing that even their cattle may die of sunstroke, place them under shelter without reference to whether they can be sold. But many poor beasts are left to suffer, and their piteous lowing is distinctly heard above the hum and din of the fair.

The Mayor, with his experienced eye, surveys the scene on all sides. Like a mariner who feels a coming storm before any sign is evident to his eyes, Father Jerome has the air of a man who foresees danger. Walking in the shade of the great trees, he touches his neighbor's elbow and says: "My friend, this heat is going to play bad pranks on us."

"What makes you think so?" demands Parjeau.

“*Mon Dieu!* It is not well to predict evil, but do you see those eight or ten yoke of oxen down there by Simmonet’s mill? Well, there it will begin—the stampede, I mean. Do you see that great ox rearing in the air and——”

The sense of danger makes him silent, and rushing to the nearest house he shouts at the top of his voice: “A stampede! A stampede! Call the women and children in quickly!”

“What! Is old Father Jerome crazy?” cries Andoche, who remains seated at a table, half overcome by his potations. Others at once realize the danger, and shouts of “A stampede!” resound in the ears of the peasants like the peals of a tocsin.

Among marching armies as well as sleeping camps sometimes a terrible fright takes possession of soldiers. The horror-stricken men, without a moment’s pause, throw down their arms and run here and there in mad confusion. How many times has a general, sure of his campaign, seen victory vanish because of a sudden panic without reason and for which nobody (?) is responsible.

So with these cattle that a moment since were quiet and under control. Some nameless terror, like an insidious simoom, has seized the herd. The fury spreads like magic, and they madly plunge and rear, and turn the market-place into a scene of wild and noisy chaos. The danger is supreme. “A stampede!” The appalling announcement echoes like a peal of thunder throughout the startled fair.

Then suddenly an ominous stillness prevails, and for half a minute not a movement is made among the frightened people who are watching the spectacle from a neighboring cottage. But an unearthly bellowing breaks

the brief silence, and with heads erect and glittering eyes the cattle madly paw the ground, upturning stones and tearing up the earth until thick, blinding clouds of dust obscure the landscape. Who now can doubt the danger? The merciless sun goads the herd to frenzy.

Fadard, intoxicated but still prudent, followed by Andoche, approaches the door of the *cabaret** where they have been dawdling. A cloud of hot dust fills their eyes and nostrils, and they gladly seek refuge within.

At the same moment the distracted beasts make another dash. Like demons they career about the market-place, trampling upon and killing each other in their desperate struggle to reach the exit gates. Through these they plunge and go tearing along the highway, the earth seeming to tremble beneath their feet. The little booths by the wayside are far from safe. A part of Andoche's jacket is carried away impaled upon the horn of a bull which has dashed against the wall of the *cabaret*. Consternation fills the hearts of the villagers. All who have dear ones abroad on the road or in the fields are pale with anguish. Children, too, are missing, and the suspense is heart-breaking. What will be the sequel? They hardly dare look out to see if the storm and fury have at all abated.

Under a cart-shed at the end of the market-place stands a huddled group of men. They await the end. Suddenly a little child, about two years old, runs out of a wood-chopper's house and starts across the road along which a part of the herd is still rushing like a whirlwind.

* A drinking pavilion.

“He will be killed!” yelled some one, as a young heifer racing forward just overleaps the boy.

But a special providence seems to protect children, and for the nonce the little fellow escapes. He miraculously reaches the shed unharmed. There is not a man in the cart-shed who is not thrilled with the desire to go and save other little ones from certain death. To be sure, many sit rooted to the spot, lacking the courage to move; but not all of them are cowards.

Just as a young girl ventures to cross the road, an enormous bull comes thundering along. She is in imminent peril. Who will attempt an heroic act of rescue? A sickening fear seizes the spectators. Onward course the foaming animals, following in the dusty wake of their formidable leader.

Not an instant too soon some one rushes out of a neighboring cottage and, clasping the young girl in his arms, prepares to shield her from the oncoming cattle. His presence of mind is remarkable; but no time is left for escape, for the herd is upon him. He makes one more effective move—he hurls the little maid into a clump of rushes, where she falls heavily, but beyond the pale of danger. He rolls under the trampling hoofs, and the whole battalion of beasts passes over the body of one who has attempted the impossible. What a terrible sight! He is crushed and bruised, but they expect to find him a shapeless mass.

“Who is he?” shout a hundred or more people nearly in unison.

“I believe he is Bruno Volane,” answers a peasant of Trinquelin.

“It’s just like him,” observes an old woman, “to rush to certain death. Ah! but he is brave.”

By this time the people, too, are in a panic. Husbands and wives and parents and children have become separated, and terrible havoc has been made by the cattle along the roads, and valuable beasts are lost or killed. The adjacent country looks not unlike a battle-field. Here and there the wounded beasts lie bleeding upon the ground. The market-place shows traces of an unusual struggle and of hard usage; the cottages are battered, windows knocked out and doors unhinged.

This stampede surpasses anything in the way of a calamity ever known in the annals of St. Benoit.

At length, a man armed with a cudgel strides forth as if to encounter the foe. Each advancing bull is driven into the ring by the man Andoche calls "the Bear." He is a singular-looking figure as he stands there, with his unkempt beard and hair fluttering in the breeze.

Rushing to the spot where Bruno has fallen, L'Ours ("the Bear") takes a guarded attitude and then strikes out in every direction, beating down the cattle right and left.

"He will be killed!" cries some one. "Why should he go to Bruno's aid now? The fellow must certainly be dead."

"Have you not noticed that L'Ours always happens around when Mother Mathurine's son is in danger?"

"Yes—how strange it is!"

"And why is it?" asks Rosalie, who is always prying into others' affairs, being the most inquisitive of women.

"Why? Why? Go and ask *him*. Perhaps he will tell you."

Meanwhile L'Ours is beating off the infuriated animals, and the panic gradually subsides. Seizing Bruno with one hand and protecting himself with the other, he

speeds to a neighboring cottage, regardless of the disorder and confusion that prevail.

The house in question belongs to an eccentric personage, well known throughout the country for his benevolence. Assistance is never withheld from the worthy seeker by Monsieur Eugène. Day and night he is always ready to give advice or succor to the unfortunate, and one can enter his house without going through the form of knocking. A welcome is always certain and the latch-string is never within.

Without ceremony, therefore, L'Ours enters the cottage, and advancing to a couch gently places his burden on the counterpane. A crowd of curious people has followed and now enters in procession. Bruno's eyes and cheeks are ghastly with blood and his lips are set and colorless. As he lies motionless upon the bed Jean Manant (L'Ours) begins to feel his hands and limbs with anxious haste.

"Nothing broken here," he remarks, stroking the unfortunate's left leg. "Nor there, nor there," he continues, probing Bruno's arms and chest. Large beads of perspiration stand on his forehead and tears fall from his eyes like rain.

Monsieur Eugène arrives at this moment.

"What is the matter?" he inquires solicitously.

Jean makes no reply, and Brigitte Martinet and Félicité Mafflu proceed in discordant concert to relate the adventure. As both speak at once and each has a different version to tell, Eugène is unable to understand a word. So calling Catherine, who is lingering near the door, he says: "Madame Barrau, will you have the kindness to explain the situation? Come, Brigitte, let Madame speak."

Catherine comes forward. All are surprised at her lack of emotion. In a few words she tells Monsieur Eugène all the circumstances : how Bruno rushed to the child's rescue, and how Jean bravely fought his way to Bruno's prostrate body and carried him here.

"Remarkable!" exclaims Monsieur in cheerful tones. "And now, good people, do me the favor to wait outside in the yard until we see what can be done. Too many here will be an inconvenience, but one or two of you may stay to assist."

Catherine and Sidonie, the little cripple, remain, but the others file slowly out into the yard. As she is leaving an old peasant woman is motioned to remain. She is a nonentity, but a woman who will follow Monsieur Eugène's directions to the letter without a quiver of the eyelids or the lips. Nothing astonishes her, for she is like an iceberg—immovable and unfathomable. In the village there are people who declare she never speaks. Jeannille Marselon is a curiosity to the villagers, who years since have ceased trying to thaw out this living icicle.





CHAPTER V.

SIDONIE.

SCARCELY had the door closed upon the crowd when Monsieur Eugène threw off his coat, and bending over Bruno's prostrate form said :

“ First let us see if there is life.”

With these words he rested his head on Bruno's chest. Jean Manant could hardly breathe, so deep was his dread of the possible truth ; while poor little Sidonie was choked with anguish. After a moment of cruel suspense Eugène raised his head sadly, as if to regain his breath, and then once more inclined his ear.

Jean Manant and Sidonie were in despair. Catherine alone remained calm and collected. A few more moments of suspense passed, and then with a little cry Monsieur Eugène sprang up.

“ He is living. His heart is beating, though faintly,” said he. “ Wait ! ”

He immediately selected a lance from an unpretentious little surgeon's case near by and summoned the three women to help him.

“ Here, Jeannille,” he quickly called, “ support Bruno's head and shoulders—like that. And you, Madame

Barrau, will you kindly hold his wrist firmly? You are not easily frightened, are you? I am going to bleed him."

"All right," answered Catherine, without a sign of flinching, as she seized his wrist, but poor Sidonie was trembling like an aspen-leaf.

Under the lance the vein was opened and there spurted out a stream of blood, the sight of which nearly distracted the little lame girl.

"Good! good!" said Monsieur Eugène, with a smile.

"Is he saved?" asked Jean in a trembling whisper.

"At all events, the chances are in his favor."

"But those cattle must have crushed his bones," insisted Manant, who was still possessed by a horrible doubt.

"Jean, my boy, it is a miracle; but, barring more or less severe contusions, Bruno has escaped."

Still incredulous, Jean regarded Monsieur Eugène steadily for half a minute as if to read the truth in the latter's face. Calmly Eugène returned his gaze and soon Jean's doubts vanished, for a sigh fell from Bruno's lips.

A great joy illumined Manant's face and Sidonie lifted her eyes in prayer. Old Jeannille sat unmoved and impenetrable. Catherine looked at the young man a little curiously. He seemed too slender and delicate a fellow to be so daring. His white arm was like a woman's. Indeed, what woman in St. Benoit could not boast of more muscle than he? And his slender wrist inspired a sort of pity in her breast.

"Poor fellow!" she murmured to herself, as she reflected how ardently, though respectfully, Bruno loved her—not daring to confess it.

Poor fellow, indeed !

Sidonie gazed upon his shapely form in mute admiration. How perfect he seemed to her. How noble and graceful. Ah ! could he but learn to love her !

Bruno moved gently. Another sigh—a deeper one than before—came from his lips. Monsieur Eugène was bathing his wounds with arnica and bandaging them. Bruno's long-fringed drooping eyelids feebly opened, and he slowly looked around him.

Catherine affected an air of cool indifference, but Sidonie wore a look of absolute devotion. Bruno abruptly changed his gaze from the lame girl's enraptured face to Madame Barrau's, and his own became radiant for a moment. A bit of color crept into his cheeks. Catherine continued to hold his wrist while the vein was bleeding, and the contact of her soft hand sent a delicious magnetic thrill through his body.

"Thank you, Madame Catherine," he murmured—hardly above a whisper—and then, with a smile on his lips, he again fainted away.

Catherine also smiled, but in a spirit of triumph, and Jeannille turned upon her a look of such frigidity that the gamekeeper's wife, blushing and disconcerted, asked if the operation was not nearly over.

"A moment more ; but if you are tired Jean will relieve you," answered Monsieur Eugène. Jean Manant did not require a second bidding. With a delicacy that was wonderful in so clumsy a man, he took Bruno's arm in his hands. In a few minutes Bruno returned to consciousness.

"Where do you suffer ?" asked Monsieur Eugène.

"I am not in pain," said Bruno, his eyes riveted on Catherine's face. Just then the door slammed.

"Who's there?" shouted Eugène, impatiently.

"It is I, Monsieur," answered the awkward Firmin, as he entered.

"What do you want? Didn't they tell you I was engaged and did not wish to be disturbed?"

"But important business brings me."

"Well, well, speak quickly."

"I wish to ask Monsieur my rights."

"In what respect?"

"Monsieur knows of the stampede. Well, I had just bought a pair of oxen from Carassol, who lives at Bocasse, but they had not been surrendered to me when the stampede commenced."

"Well?"

"Well, they did like all the rest. They ran away."

"Ah! And Carassol claims that the transaction was concluded in good faith and that he is not responsible for the oxen?"

"Exactly."

"Let us see, Firmin. Had you been drinking?"

"To speak honestly, a little, Monsieur."

"That is right—be honest. Do you know where Carassol's oxen were standing?"

"Near the watering-trough."

"And you wish my opinion in the matter? Listen. Carassol must assist you to recover the oxen, and you must make a diligent search for them."

"But I have paid for the beasts."

"Then Carassol is in the right."

"I will go to law about it."

"You will lose the case, my boy."

"Well, we shall see," returned Firmin, who, seeing Catherine, immediately approached her.

“Ah, good-day, Madame Barrau. Are you well? I perceive that you are charming as ever.”

Blushing a little at this bold overture, Catherine answered quietly with a word. Firmin assumed such an offensive manner toward her that, obliged to treat it as insolence, she prepared to leave. Firmin, too, showed his intention to depart.

“*Au revoir*,” said he. “Thanks for your advice, Monsieur.”

Catherine, with disgust, turning to go, observed near the door old Jeannille, who was staring at her with cold, penetrating eyes.

Catherine again changed color. “It seems as though she were playing the spy on me,” she thought. “Can it be that my husband has put a watch over me? If I knew that to be the fact——”

Always impulsive, Catherine now imagined the worst. She fancied she had discovered a plot in which everybody was arrayed against her. “This is the third time I have caught that old hag watching me as if she would read my thoughts.”

Firmin, meanwhile, was walking by her side.

“Go away,” said Catherine disdainfully. “One would think you had taken it upon yourself to compromise me.”

The man certainly was a sot, but he possessed an enormous amount of vanity. Catherine’s words therefore flattered his self-conceit.

“Upon my honor, Madame——”

Firmin for several years had served as valet to a Parisian gentleman, and he once had heard his master speak thus to a great lady. So thinking to please Catherine he made use of the high-sounding phrase, adding *sotto*

voce in her ear: "Meet me to-morrow at three o'clock at Bemacle's Cross, *chère* madame," and without waiting for her reply he passed on ahead with rapid step.

Catherine shrugged her shoulders. A feeling of indignation took possession of her. She redoubled her pace and proceeded home. Since the day when Savin humiliated her before the peasants she had been enraged and miserable. "On my knees," she would repeat a dozen times a day, "he compelled me to ask pardon. On my knees!" And through her brain all sorts of schemes of vengeance were fitting. With all the force of her darker nature she had begun to hate the valiant soldier whose generosity she should have recognized and reciprocated. Haunted by the idea that ever since that memorable day people had distrusted her, she felt able less and less to strive against the evil spirit to which she had fallen a prey.

On every side as she walked homeward an extraordinary confusion reigned. Many were engaged in a search after the missing cattle. The men taunted each other and quarrelled, and more than one peasant, after searching in vain for his cow, ox, or bull, took the one nearest him and declared without hesitation that it belonged to him. Nobody can be more ferocious than the peasant who loses his worldly goods, and in the present instance more than fifty had been dispossessed.

Fadard stood leaning against the wall in the bar-room of the inn when Andoche entered. His face had been rendered hideous by a large gash—the result of a blow from a bottle. Night was approaching. The sun, in a flood of glowing crimson and amber, was sinking beyond the world's west. The leaves of the tall poplars were gently sighing as the twilight breeze, prod-

gal with caresses, wooed them into soothing accents. Still the wrathful peasants haggled and disputed the claims of possession as the animals slowly and with great difficulty were recaptured. No one claimed the dead cattle. The controversy was alone confined to the living. The sun in a final burst of glory flashed a brilliant farewell to this section of the earth as Madame Barrau, excited to hatred and anger and imagining all kinds and degrees of troubles to be hers, went on her way with downcast eyes. Once, however, she glanced at the parting orb, whose lustrous rays recalled to her mind Bruno's look of joy when he beheld her beside the couch.

If Catherine had allowed herself to remember only Savin's generosity instead of harboring wicked thoughts; if she had studied the situation and reflected a little, she would have realized what a meagre sacrifice of self-love would have won her husband over to devotion once more. But this effort seemed to her out of the question. She only remembered that if Savin did not love her two other men did. Had not Firmin and Bruno evinced how much she was to be desired? Ah! they would know—either one of them—how to appreciate her beauty and fine qualities. Thus onward she walked, with vengeance in her heart.

Beyond the village comparative calm prevailed. Here no disputes were heard. On the rustic little bridge she met Mother Mathurine. The poor woman was hurrying toward St. Benoit.

'Have you seen Bruno, Madame Catherine?' she asked, with heart-broken sobs.

"Do not take on so, Mother Mathurine. He is safe. Monsieur Eugène is taking care of him."

"Tell me the worst, Madame," pleaded the old woman.

"I have, Madame. It is true—but he owes his life to Jean Manant."

"To *him*? Did *he* save him?"

"Yes, Madame. From under the trampling herd he rescued him."

"*Again!* Thanks, Madame Catherine. But I must hasten to Bruno's side. I may be able to do something for him."

And with quickened steps Mother Mathurine proceeded to Monsieur Eugène's house, where she arrived a few moments later, breathless and trembling. Through the yard all instinctively made way for her to pass.

"Where is my son?" she asked, hoarsely. They pointed to the front room. Seeing her enter, Monsieur Eugène came forward to speak to her.

"One moment before you embrace Bruno. He has just fainted again."

"You would tell me he is dead!"

"No! no! He is living and doing well. But you may embrace a brave lad here and thank him for his courage," and Monsieur Eugène pointed to Jean Manant.

Mother Mathurine, turning, seized his hands and kissed them.

"Mother Mathurine," cried the brawny Jean, somewhat embarrassed, "do not thank *me*."

"What! When you have saved his life for the fourth time! *Mon Dieu!* What courage!"

"It was nothing," answered he, astonished that his action in Bruno's behalf should be judged so meritorious.

At this moment Bruno stirred.

"Bruno wants to embrace you," observed Monsieur Eugène to Mother Mathurine.

"O Bruno! Naughty, careless boy," she cried. "Did you not promise me that you would not again expose yourself to danger? You will be the death of me—running so many risks."

"What could I do, mother? Could I leave a child to die without raising a finger to save her?"

"O my boy! You know how much I love you. Do not torment me again. Be more careful in the future."

"But you forget, mother, that my friend Jean comes in time to save me always," and he seized Manant's hand, the latter trying to conceal his emotion. Some one was silently weeping tears of joy in a secluded corner of the room. Poor little Sidonie! Ordinarily she would have hastened to embrace Mother Mathurine. But now a fear possessed her and she could not trust herself to speak. For worlds she would not expose her swollen eyes that Bruno might see what she endured.

"Are you suffering now?" asked Mother Mathurine.

"My body seems broken, but I have no actual pain," answered Bruno.

"What a miracle that your brain was not crushed. God be praised!" said the grateful mother. "But can you not come home?"

"I believe so."

"No imprudence, if you please," expostulated Eugène. "Bruno must remain here for a few days or a week if necessary."

"You are too good, Monsieur Eugène," said the young man. "Already I have given you so much trouble. With Jean's assistance I can easily go home."

Sidonie was hoping that Bruno would mention her presence. The poor girl was looking reproachfully at him when Mother Mathurine noticed her for the first time.

"Why, Sidonie, child! You have been very quiet. How long have you been here? Come and kiss me."

"Madame Catherine also assisted Monsieur Eugène when he bled my arm. *She* held it for him," broke out Bruno, unconsciously wounding the already suffering Sidonie.

"Yes, I know. I met her on the way here. Poor Catherine! She looked unhappy!"

"But she ought to be the happiest woman in the village," said Monsieur Eugène earnestly.

Bruno's countenance assumed a peculiar expression, while Madame Mathurine, who understood matters, drew little Sidonie closer to her side. "Ah, my dear," she said in a whisper, "if it ever depends upon me it is you he shall choose." Sidonie clasped Mother Mathurine with gracious joy.

By the side of Monsieur Eugène old Jeannille sat as though transfixed, with her eyes sharply directed at the lame girl. One by one the stars began to blossom in the heavens. Night was come. Nature had fallen asleep and the beautiful silver lights were keeping guard on high.

With renewed thanks to his kind benefactor Bruno, assisted by Mother Mathurine, Jean, and Sidonie, started for home. Sidonie's face beamed with pleasure as the young man leaned his right arm on her shoulder. Happy Sidonie! How tender were her thoughts for him! She stepped with great care lest her limb should bother him.

The moon now hanging high in the heavens lent an

enchantment to the scene, touching with its mellow light the grand old trees and tender flowers. A silence more eloquent than words fell upon the little train ; but all in their hearts thanked God for the beautiful night and for preserving the well-beloved Bruno from a violent death.





CHAPTER VI.

DARK DAYS.

OCTOBER with its kaleidoscopic dress comes on apace. Upon seeing the woods made glorious by the regal hues of gold and scarlet, we are tempted to say that the ending season is not less beautiful in its way than the beginning one. Great yellow patches on the foliage gleam in the wan sunlight. Nature is ablaze with color. The holly boughs are flaunting their bold red berries in the face of the wind, and everywhere the leaves in brilliant confusion flutter through the air.

Now and then in the distance a gun's report is heard. The gamekeepers are now on the alert for prowling poachers. Water stands in the ditches. The fog is dense at night and in the morning, and the meadows already are often too cold for the flocks. The old belfry in the village—its greatest pride—is a mass of vines, now turned to vivid crimson.

At the door of his little shop stands Andoche the blacksmith, adorned with his leather apron. His brawny arms are bare to the elbows. In one uplifted hand he holds a glass of wine, while with the other he holds Firmin by the arm.

"My friend," says he, "your affairs do not concern me in the least. You are old enough to know how to conduct yourself. But if you wish to hear a bit of good advice I will say—*beware!*"

“Of what ? Of whom ?”

“Of everybody in general and in particular of—Madame Catherine.”

“The gamekeeper’s wife ?” said Firmin, with an egotistical leer.

“To be sure. There are not *two* Catherines.”

“Why do you say ‘beware’ ?”

“Why ? Are you a fool ?”

“I hope not.”

“Well, my friend, you now have the appearance——”

“O Andoche !”

“Well, old comrade, I may be a drunkard, but you can make up your mind to one thing—my eyes are wide open just the same.”

“And what do you see *in particular* just at present ?”

“That you are making a fool of yourself, and I am not the only one who thinks so.”

Firmin makes an indignant gesture, as though in protest against the assertion or assumption that a man of his importance should be so regarded by his friends ; as though he could be led about by the nose ! He—Firmin !

“Your health, Firmin,” adds Andoche, touching his visitor’s glass.

“Here’s to you,” returns Firmin, in a preoccupied manner.

The blacksmith, having drained his glass to the dregs with one toss of the hand, goes on to say : “My friend, I have not lived in the city and frequented the haunts of society like you—though I was once in garrison at Château Thierry—but I have a grain or two of common sense, and were I in your place I should not prowling around the little cottage over there like a dog.”

"And why, pray, should I not visit the gamekeeper's house?"

"Because there are more poachers than millionaires in the world."

"Well, what of it?"

"Nothing; only Savin Barrau is a man who attends strictly to his own business."

"And how does that concern me?"

"Ah, so you do not understand? Well, then, come into my shop and I will explain. Now then," he continues as they seat themselves inside the little shop, "only four days ago Savin was shot at by some poacher on his mistress' preserves."

"So I heard. Well?"

"The bullet missed that time, but who knows whether he will escape the next?"

"That does not concern me."

"But don't you see, you simpleton, that if Savin is killed, the world will say you, egged on by Catherine, committed the deed?"

"What? You mean——"

"If such a thing should occur, there are two of you to prove an alibi."

"Two? How so?"

"Bruno also might be suspected."

"That young scamp? But she cares nothing for him."

"Has she said so?"

"Yes, a dozen times."

"Ah, so she converses with you frequently, eh? But, my friend, that is not the only danger you encounter. You, too, are sometimes given to poaching."

"I?"

"Oh, yes. I know a thing or two about dogs my-

self, and the young hound crouching there by the forge with such a harmless air is the finest hunter in St. Benoit, and we all know the country is not wanting in good dogs."

"And what of that, if you please?"

"Nothing at all, my friend, only should Catherine's husband catch you at it a shot from his gun would soon put an end to you, and the law would exonerate him. Poachers always get the worst of it in those cases."

Firmin turns visibly pale. True valor is quite an unknown quantity in his composition.

"Your health, my boy," repeats Andoche, "and take my advice : Be careful what you do. Everybody knows Madame Catherine's love of coquetry. It is not that she cares for you—oh, no ! but she hates her husband. If Barrau at any time since the raspberry *fête* had but asked forgiveness, she would have turned her back on you fast enough, you may be sure."

In spite of Firmin's rising indignation, Andoche continues : "And if she were not so often twitted by the village girls of being at odds with Savin, she might now, even, overlook the humiliation she endured that day. But Rosalie and Félicité are always mocking her on the subject, and it only adds fuel to the flame. There will be trouble one of these days, mark my words, and as you are my friend, I advise you to keep out of it."

A man of Firmin's character and disposition, however, never accepts good advice. His egotism is too great, his mind too stupid for that. So now, with a supercilious smile, Firmin listens to Andoche's not wholly unreasonable or irrelevant harangue.

"You can accept my advice or not, as you choose, my friend. But were I in your place, I should much

prefer to pass my time with old Andoche, tinkling the merry glass of wine, than to throw myself away on a designing woman."

Firmin indulges in a burst of laughter.

"So that is your opinion, is it? Well, well—let us drink a bumper and change the subject, for I am not a little weary of it, old fellow. Here's to you and to all good counselors."

And so for the time the subject is dropped. Andoche, however, poor sot that he is, has expressed opinions that are not altogether wrong.

For over two months Catherine has daily become more sullen and capricious. At times her face wears a terrible expression, and though she has lost none of her beauty, still, under the influence of the fixed idea that haunts her, she appears less gracious and agreeable. In her face lurks a defiant, scornful expression, which does not become her, and her smile is constrained and bitter. To those who know her well but one solution is evident.

Her thirst for revenge is inordinate. She evinces it in her actions. And Savin lacks that suppleness of discernment to characterize it as a craving for revenge, and thus obtusely fails to endeavor to turn her mind into other channels. He simply accepts his wife's silence, and, to him, only odd conduct as a sudden caprice.

"When she is ready to do so she will return to my heart's shelter," he thinks, little imagining the true state of the case.

The love and magnanimity he displayed by rescuing her from the wretched thralldom of her position after the D'Angerolles *esclandre*, he assumes, have rendered Catherine ever grateful to him, and have precluded all chance of prolonged anger on her part toward him who has so

definitely proven his passion for her. And thus reflecting and thus reasoning, he waits for her to manifest some sign of her desire for a reconciliation. But as time goes on and Madame Barrau reveals more quixotic tendencies, he becomes impatient. There is naught more fatiguing than the existence of two people who, forced to dwell under the same roof, are at war with each other. Then each word has a special meaning. Every step, gesture, and movement may be misinterpreted by the injured one. The torture of mind endured nearly amounts to frenzy. For a day it is a terrible ordeal; for months it is a cruel nightmare. Barrau has a magnanimous nature, and if Catherine should come to him with one expression of regret he would take her in his arms eagerly and lovingly. But no. Catherine remains frigid in feeling and manner. Accordingly Savin, showing an equal disposition to maintain an obstinate silence, allows his animosity to ripen. He is exasperated and unhappy over their relations. To go on living in this way will soon be unbearable. But he constantly asks himself what is to be done.

Catherine is quite as miserable. "What! I am not yet twenty, and must I live all my life under this horrible yoke? Surely death will be preferable. Ah, if he but loved me. But he despises me."

And thus she rebels—racking her brains for some means of escape. Unfortunately, she has not the nature which can forgive and forget. To punish the man who has treated her like a slave—yes, like a *slave*—that is her one idea. But how? That is not yet clear to her.

"Only to be free! only to be free!" she repeats. But how? No solution occurs to her mind until one day she finds herself saying: "What if Savin should die?"

In justice, however, be it said, she rejects that thought as too horrible. "Wretched creature that I am to think of it!" she cries.

Alas! how bitter are her reflections. And as she looks out upon the late autumn landscape and watches the scattering leaves of red and gold, again she thinks: "After all, he may not live long. Stronger men than he have been vanquished by a bad cold—a sudden fever."

And in imagination she sees him, pale and emaciated, reduced by sickness to a shadow—in a proper condition to be humiliated. At this very moment Barrau appears at the gate, and his powerful step resounds on the gravel. Patachoud dances about him with canine glee. Graceful, young, and vigorous, with broad shoulders and magnificent physique, the gamekeeper advances, opens the door, and enters.

His presence arouses Catherine from her sullen revery.

"Fool! that I should dream of his becoming ill. Why, he is made of iron."

And brooding over her wretched existence, the idea of her husband's death seems less revolting to her.

"It would be still better if he killed me himself," she inwardly declares; "I deserve it."

But a contemptuous smile (or is it a commiserating look?) from Savin serves to dispel all thoughts save those of hatred from her breast.



CHAPTER VII.

THE INVITATION.

A MERRY little troop lined the way leading into the forest. Song and mirth echoed through the trees as the happy band tripped along the road, their object being to invite the Barraus to a wedding. In certain rural parts of France it is the custom for the engaged couple, their relatives and best friends to visit in a body those they desire to invite to the wedding, and the future bridegroom, if it be a woman addressed, or the future bride, if it be a man, offers sugar-plums, which if accepted signifies that the implied invitation to the wedding is likewise accepted. In refusing, one also refuses to be present at the wedding. Moreover, a solemn obligation is involved in the acceptance. Those who partake of the sweet almonds are expected not only to join in the festivities, but to furnish a wedding-gift. Eggs, game, fruit, vegetables, and articles of food are usually the principal presents received by the happy couple.

The marriage of pretty little Suzanne Perrogon with Jacques Percier was about to be celebrated. Suzanne was the niece of Jeannille Marselon, whose strange character was referred to in the preceding chapter. Jacques owned a pretty little house and lot—an inheritance from his mother. In the contract he exacted the promise that his wife should engage herself formally,

after the birth of her first child, as a wet-nurse in Paris, which is frequently done by the peasants of Morvan and of other sections. As a matter of fact, hundreds of marriage contracts contain such a provision.

For a period of some sixty years Morvan was one of the poorest and most destitute provinces of France. The soil was unyieldingly sterile and the climate cruel. The people found it extremely difficult to subsist on black bread alone, and the outlook for them seemed gloomy enough, until the idea occurred to one of the female Morvanelles—as they are called—to seek the position of wet-nurse in Paris. After a time wet-nursing became a means of livelihood for many peasant women, an industry, so to speak. These women proved to be the agents of civilization in the Morvan, and by degrees they brought not only money there, but certain ideas of luxury and of social propriety. The more intelligent women, while pursuing their vocation among well-bred and even distinguished families, acquired a certain refinement of manner, and to them the little province owed its increased prosperity and enlightenment. It is true, the hard-earned money too often found its way into the pockets of the wine-seller, who became the richest man in the village in a short time ; but times were better than ever before in the Morvan, and the peasants rejoiced in their good fortune.

In small provincial towns to which strangers seldom come the inhabitants are all, or nearly all, related to each other. For instance, Andoche claimed relationship with everybody in the village. He professed to be a grand-nephew of Jeannille Marselon ; and as the villagers did not deny it, he established his claims by virtue of the axiom—“ silence gives consent.”

He accompanied the procession on the invitation tour. Perhaps his superfluous jollity was due to the fact that he held in his arms a demijohn which Monsieur Eugène had just presented to the betrothed. Having persuaded Jacques Percier that he was fainting with thirst, the future groom reluctantly consented to let Andoche test the wine. Without further ceremony Andoche offered a sip to everybody, extending his politeness so far as to permit nobody to drink alone—which he said meant bad luck.

By the time he reached Barrau's cottage his spirits were very much elevated and his dangerous tongue wagged incessantly.

"Attention! Halt! Right about face!" he shouted as Savin appeared at the door. The latter was pleased at the spectacle, and his face brightened as he thought what a pleasant diversion it would be for Catherine.

"Come in, Jacques," said Savin, "and welcome, Suzanne. Happy to see you all."

The little party entered joyously, but the face of Catherine froze the words upon their tongues, the smiles upon their lips. Pale, stern, and relentless, she scarcely replied to those who addressed her.

"She will bring bad luck upon us with that terrible look," thought Suzanne.

Jacques Percier spoke to Catherine, extending the usual compliments and saying: "Madame Barrau, our happiness will not be complete unless you are present at our marriage. Will you accept a bonbon?"

He offered her the box. She stepped back a little.

"I thank you, Jacques," said she. "May you be happy as you deserve to be."

A look of disappointment passed over his face, and

noticing it Catherine added : " It is not for me to accept or to decline. I am not mistress here."

" Then you, Monsieur Savin, will you not—" But before Jacques had finished speaking Savin took two *dragées* from the box, eating one and giving the other to his wife.

" Catherine exaggerates," said he. " There are some things that a wife cannot do without consulting her husband, but she accepts your invitation, I am sure, and so do I, with pleasure. You will please accept from me a roebuck—if Madame le Hausseur allows me to kill one."

Catherine bit her lips in mortification and vexation. But Savin had broken the ice, and when he brought out some fine old curaçoa the callers regaled themselves freely and all became merry again.

As soon as they had gone Catherine said petulantly : " You need no longer fear that I shall be too gay. I could not be so if I tried."

" I never objected to your having a good time—in a proper way," replied Barrau gently, but with an unmistakable accent of firmness.

" But if I am not to dance it will be absurd for me to go to the wedding."

" Nobody will prevent you from dancing."

" Yes, so you say *to-day*; but when the time comes you will be just as jealous as ever, and I shall have to suffer for it."

" Why talk so foolishly? You only weary me with this useless discussion."

" I know it."

" But believe me, my child, a woman who will excite her husband's jealousy is either a coquette or a wilful

vixen. It rests with you whether Suzanne's wedding-day shall be an agreeable one to us."

"Agreeable! I suppose it would be so to you if I neither raised my eyes, nor opened my mouth, nor danced with Bruno, nor Firmin, nor Andoche, or any young man whatsoever. But if old Father Mathieu, or Grassy, or Monsieur the Mayor should be so good as to invite me, then I may accept with alacrity. Bah!"

Savin, who had hoped to pave the way toward a reconciliation, now saw the folly of the endeavor and replied nothing. Whistling to Patachaud and taking his gun, he left the house.

"What a wretched existence!" he muttered as he disappeared under the frost-touched trees.

Left alone, Catherine raised her arms toward heaven with an expression of utter despair. "*Mon Dieu!* how dearly would I pay for freedom," she cried.

Savin, on the other hand, soothed by the quiet atmosphere of the woods, flattered himself that upon reflection Catherine would understand the conciliatory spirit which had prompted him to accept the wedding invitation. The wedding would be a diversion for Catherine, and he made up his mind not to dictate to or upbraid her whatever she might do; even if she danced with Bruno or Firmin, both of whom he disapproved. He resolved to bring about a reconciliation if possible, and he thought this little concession on his part would accomplish it. Knowing his wife's love for gayety, he felt confident that a day's unrestrained enjoyment would dispel the cloud and restore her to good-nature once more. And the brave-hearted fellow smiled to himself as he thought of his home again blessed with peace and happiness.

On the narrow path which plunged down a steep declivity into a ravine he encountered Fadard, the friend of Andoche and the cousin of Mademoiselle Faillot.

The man was proceeding, with the assistance of his cane, like a sober-minded citizen.

"Ah! it is Monsieur Fadard," said Barrau; "and where the devil did you come from?"

"From Dun les Places. I have cut across country, as you see."

The gamekeeper examined Fadard's shoes and trousers. They bore no traces of mud, and there were swamps in the region of which he had spoken.

"And you are going to see Mademoiselle Faillot?" asked Barrau.

"Just so," returned Fadard.

Savin continued to question him in order to study him the more closely. There seemed something suspicious in the man's movements. Why was he prowling about this gloomy, forsaken spot, which bore an ill name among the peasants and which most people avoided? The trees were so dense that scarcely a bit of light penetrated into the forest, and it was still and lonely here on this chill autumn day. Fadard's deceitful air was obvious to Barrau, who faced him with a stern countenance on which suspicion was plainly written. Before this look Fadard's eyes fell.

"At what time did you set out from Dun?"

"At two o'clock," replied Fadard tartly.

"You must be a good walker to have come so far in so short a time."

As Barrau spoke he fancied he spied something concealed under the other's clothing. Fadard appeared ill at ease.

“Another time,” continued Savin, “you had better take the main road. One sometimes has a bad encounter in such places as this.”

While speaking he put his hand familiarly on Fadard’s shoulder. The latter lost countenance, and without reflecting that he compromised himself in so doing, he turned and fled.

“Ah ! it seems that Monsieur Fadard has something to conceal. And what cause has he to fear me, unless, as I suspect, he is a poacher ?”

His first thought was to chase the runaway, but he abandoned the idea as useless. One might as well hunt for a needle in a haystack as for a man in this wilderness.

“Never mind. He will come back again some day, unless his cowardice gets the better of him.”

And smiling at the thought, Savin went on his way.





CHAPTER VIII.

THE WEDDING.

THE day of Suzanne's wedding came, bringing with it no change for the better in the home of the Barraus. Hostility still existed. Savin was as usual sad at heart, and Catherine was visibly indifferent and disdainful. She always dressed in excellent taste and in attire that, however simple, accentuated her extraordinary beauty. Formerly the D'Angerolles had known luxury and affluence, and Catherine had inherited a becoming air of stateliness. Her dignity and grace made her the acknowledged belle of the province.

As Savin gazed upon her he could not conceal his admiration, and gently laying his hand on her shoulder he said : "Naughty little woman, you have no equal if you would but consent to listen to reason."

But Catherine remained mute and indifferent to his caress. Savin courteously opened the door for her to pass out, and soon they were on their way to the *fête*.

Any one seeing them as they walked together, he with his military air and remarkable physique, and she enveloped in a white mantle which set off her queenly figure to the best advantage, would have been tempted to exclaim : "What a fine couple !" as indeed they were.

Before the blacksmith's shop Fadard, with his hands

in his pockets, was whistling a hunter's song. An expression of malice dominated his features, but when the Barraus passed by he saluted them with a smile that succeeded in its attempt to be sarcastic.

‘Good-morning, Fadard,’ returned Savin. “You seem in better spirits than when I last saw you.”

Fadard said nothing, but he continued to smile in a supercilious manner. Catherine glanced at him. Their eyes met and the young woman read a sort of challenge in his look. He was ready to go to the wedding, but he was waiting for Andoche, who had not yet completed his toilet.

“Bah ! how I hate water,” muttered Andoche. “The bother of going to *filles* is that one must souse in water. I never drink the stuff and I heartily dislike to handle it. Thank fortune, I am ready,” he said at length as he arranged his necktie. “Let’s be off.”

In front of the conjugal cottage many of the guests had assembled, and a bevy of boys and girls merrily danced and frolicked on the green, while the old fogies, calmly seated under the trees, discussed the frivolity of the young and the wisdom of the old.

Within the cottage all was confusion. Nothing seemed to be in place. The babel of voices and scampering of feet were fairly deafening. The merry-makers continued to arrive. Two or three ancient carry-alls, weighted down with village boys and girls who were shouting at the top of their voices, drove up and discharged their load at the cottage door. Greetings and embraces followed, and all gave themselves up to the enjoyment of the hour.

The musicians finally came, and after drinking with Andoche, all fell in line for the wedding-march to the

Mayor's office. It was a pretty sight. Two hundred guests, walking two by two, followed the bride. The head of the little procession passed the house of Monsieur Eugène before the last pair started.

A wedding in the provinces is considered a great affair. The day is given over to enjoyment. Business is suspended and the whole country-side joins in the festivities. In this particular wedding every one was interested, for the bride and groom were both popular favorites. To be sure, many a girl thought Jacques a simpleton to choose Suzanne, and many a lad declared Suzanne was throwing herself away ; but still the occasion was a serene and happy one. The church service, as well as the ceremony at the Mayor's, was successfully performed. During the former, Savin quietly stood watching his wife, whose face was cold and joyless.

As they left the church a young fellow who had been serving as kitchen-boy in Paris set off some fire-crackers and hurled them down before the bridal party. The village maidens were frightened at the noise and feared their dresses would catch fire. But many laughed as, accompanied by fireworks and listening to impromptu jests, the procession returned to the cottage.

Near by, in the granary, a feast had been prepared. Twenty good servants had been engaged to wait upon the guests. Suzanne's grandmother, a little woman with bright, sharp eyes, superintended the banquet, and a better table was never spread in the Morvan. The old lady ordered the waiters about with a martial air. As the party approached, she despatched one of her aids to the kitchen.

"Ursule," said she, "run to the kitchen and see if all is ready."

The lusty, buxom girl addressed disappeared into the adjoining apartment. And the kitchen! What a poem! Half hidden by blue smoke and savory steam, a dozen cooks were preparing the most tempting viands. An ox was roasting. All kinds of game, meats, vegetables, preserves, fruits, sweetmeats, *hors d'œuvres* and spices were abundantly provided. Seven days of culinary labor had been consumed in the preparation for the banquet, and nothing had been left undone to make it a success. An appetizing odor filled the air, and every guest longed to begin the feast. Those in the village who, in a spirit of economy, had declined the invitation—not feeling inclined to contribute a present—now regretted their action.

“How delicious and savory it smells,” said Mademoiselle Faillot, who had declined the invitation. . . “Dear! dear! if I had only known such a princely feast was to be prepared, I certainly should have accepted. But perhaps it is not yet too late. I will try.”

As the wedding party approached, she planted herself in the road. She was an ugly-looking, avaricious, cunning woman; but she knew well how to dissemble, and as the bride advanced, her face was wreathed in patronizing smiles.

“My dear Suzanne,” said she, “how beautiful you are. I knew you would make a pretty bride, but you are simply lovely—a hundred times beyond my expectations.”

“You are very kind, Mademoiselle Léocadia,” returned Suzanne, blushing with pleasure.

“Yes, indeed. You far surpass our last bride, Jeanne, in loveliness. And yet you know how everybody raved about her.”

"How is it that you are not one of the merry-makers?" asked Madame Percier, the groom's mother.

"Well, I was afraid I should be obliged to go to Château Chinon to-day; but my cousin did my errand for me. If I had only known——"

"You would have accepted," anticipated Suzanne.

"Yes, but you see I refused the *dragée*——"

"Oh, never mind that," said the bride graciously. "Pray come to the banquet."

"No, thank you kindly, but I made a stupid mistake, and I must abide by it. I should have dearly loved to see you beside Jacques and to have admired you in the dance, but I must respect the custom in regard to weddings."

"The custom! Pooh! Come, come, Mademoiselle, you must join us," said Jacques as he gently took her arm. "Here is Mademoiselle Léocadia who is going to dine with us," cried he to the rest. Mademoiselle Faillot protested in a hypocritical manner, inwardly elated the while at the success of her manœuvre.

Reaching the granary the tables were soon filled, and Léocadia found herself occupying a seat of honor near the bride and groom. Her flattery had proven effective, as it usually did, and the day's enjoyment was secured to her. When, however, Suzanne's grandmother saw Mademoiselle Faillot so comfortably settled she looked somewhat disappointed.

"I feared she would try to get in some way—the viper," was the old lady's observation. But there was nothing to be done about it.

The feast was a grand success. Everybody ate and drank to his or her heart's content, and the quantity of wine consumed loosened the tongues of all present to

such an extent that for a while the place was a very good imitation of a pandemonium.

At length Suzanne rose and addressed the company.

"Who wants to dance?" she loudly inquired.

Immediately fifty boys and girls, among them Catherine, Sidonie, Félicité, and Jeanne, pressed forward.

"My old grandmother danced at my marriage," said Grandma Marion, "and I will take a turn out of compliment to my little Suzanne."

And the agile, bright little old woman kept her word, amid the applause of all present. Fadard, the worse off for wine, approached Catherine to ask for the first dance.

"Madame," said he, "will you polka with me?"

"I cannot say, Monsieur. You must ask my husband."

"Oh, come, come."

"You are surprised, it seems. Isn't my husband the master?"

"Yes, of course. But I supposed it hardly would be necessary to ask permission for——"

"You were wrong, then."

"Very well, I will go and ask your husband."

And turning on his heel, Andoche's friend started in quest of Savin, with a sinister expression on his face.





CHAPTER IX.

CLOUDS.

SAVIN was still sitting at the table. Though he had finished eating and drinking he still remained there, not wishing to move lest his wife should think he was following her to spy upon her actions. Fadard had the effrontery to accost him and ask permission to dance with Catherine.

"Madame Barrau," replied the gamekeeper, "is at liberty to do as she pleases."

Though he was daring by nature, Fadard thought it wiser to make no reply, and he was turning to withdraw when Andoche, flushed and besotted by a too senseless indulgence in his "besetting sin," seized him by the lapel of his coat, saying: "*You* want to dance? Did you say you were thinking of dancing, at your age? It must have been a long time since you last looked in a mirror—ha! ha! ha! So you want to dance, eh?"

"And why shouldn't I dance if I feel that way?"

"Fellow-citizens," shouted Andoche in a high voice, pointing to Fadard, "behold this gentleman. Is it not a broad hint on the part of the ladies when they must needs ask their husbands' consent to dance with him? And just to think of it—he doesn't know people are laughing at him. My friend, you had much better remain in my society."

Strange as it appeared, Fadard did not resent the blacksmith's cutting remarks, and he offered no reply. Doubtless his reasons were good for not wishing to antagonize Andoche, or he certainly would have retaliated there and then. He walked toward the dancing-room, and rejoining Madame Barrau, acquainted her with Savin's answer.

"So you see, madame, you are at liberty to dance with me or with another, just as you choose."

"Oh, no," replied Catherine. "Not unless I am legally authorized to do so."

"You must be jesting."

"No, indeed I am not."

"But, believe me, Monsieur Barrau declared you are free to dance whenever you please."

"Yes, but that is not sufficient. Go back and bid him express himself in due form of the law. His response, I fear, was illegal."

Fadard intently regarded Catherine for a moment, but she so defiantly returned his gaze that he was perplexed.

"Perhaps," she added, "he was only making a fool of you."

"You are, at all events," he rejoined.

"Well!"

"Take care, my little woman. It will cost you dear to make fun of Fadard."

"You should say that to my husband. But perhaps it is only in dealing with women that you are so brave."

"Pooh! I would as soon tackle Monsieur Barrau as anybody else," cried Fadard, with rising anger. "Only let me find him in a tight corner——"

"Who?" thundered Savin from behind.

"Enough! We shall see," answered Fadard as he sneaked away like a whipped cur.

Catherine quickly apprised the other girls of Fadard's discomfiture. To hide his embarrassment, Fadard hastened to ask Jenny Fourès for the next dance. The merriest, liveliest girl in the whole province was Jenny, and the name of "Madcap" just suited her.

"Monsieur," said she, "it seems to me you are not very polite."

"How so, Mademoiselle?" asked Fadard.

"When a gentleman asks for a dance he takes off his cap, Monsieur."

Fadard smiled. In the provinces the peasants, as a rule, wear little skull-caps not unlike the Turkish fez, and in a dance they lend a rather picturesque effect. It is the custom to touch the cap, without removing it, when a man is asking for the pleasure of a dance. But Jenny's rebuke did not disconcert the gay Fadard in the least. He bowed low, took off his cap, and again besought her for a dance.

A burst of laughter greeted his gallantry.

"I am indeed honored, Monsieur," remarked Jenny coquettishly, "but I cannot dance without my father's permission. Go and ask him."

"Ah, Madcap, you are joking. Come."

But she would not listen. She disappeared in the crowd; while the chagrined Fadard addressed another girl, who in a similar way answered: "Go and ask my brother, Monsieur Fadard."

Fadard by this time was furious. Not only was he deprived of a partner, but he evidently was unpopular among the village girls. He resolved to make one more attempt, and turning to Rosalie he asked for a dance.

“ With pleasure, Monsieur, upon one condition.”

“ You mean I must ask somebody’s permission, eh ? ”

“ Oh, no. I shall be delighted to dance with you if you will kindly tell me your age.”

His age was a tender point with Fadard, and he turned toward the offender with a menacing gesture. Just at that moment Rosalie’s elderly husband, who, though henpecked at home, was still the possessor of a brawny pair of arms abroad, quickly settled the matter by administering a severe fistic correction which landed Fadard in a corner, panting for breath.

Recovering himself, the coward rushed off to relate his woes to Andoche, hoping that the latter in his intoxicated condition would take his part and avenge his wrongs.

But Andoche just then was enjoying himself too well to be beguiled into a quarrel and an encounter. So Fadard seated himself beside Andoche, who urged him to drown his grievances in the flowing bowl.

Meanwhile the dancing had begun. Nearly every one was thus engaged but Catherine. She obstinately refused to participate in it. If Fadard thought he alone was the victim of her caprice he was mistaken. Resolved to pose as a martyr to her husband’s whims, she treated each new-comer with the same answer, and many thinking she did not wish to dance with them, sought other partners. Some, however, took her at her word. Bruno would have given his life to have held her in his arms, but she gave him the same response, and he went away in despair, poor Sidonie watching him with tears in her eyes.

“ Oh, that he could be consoled with one who would die for his happiness,” she murmured to herself, not daring to speak to him openly.

"Enough! We shall see," answered Fadard as he sneaked away like a whipped cur.

Catherine quickly apprised the other girls of Fadard's discomfiture. To hide his embarrassment, Fadard hastened to ask Jenny Fourès for the next dance. The merriest, liveliest girl in the whole province was Jenny, and the name of "Madcap" just suited her.

"Monsieur," said she, "it seems to me you are not very polite."

"How so, Mademoiselle?" asked Fadard.

"When a gentleman asks for a dance he takes off his cap, Monsieur."

Fadard smiled. In the provinces the peasants, as a rule, wear little skull-caps not unlike the Turkish fez, and in a dance they lend a rather picturesque effect. It is the custom to touch the cap, without removing it, when a man is asking for the pleasure of a dance. But Jenny's rebuke did not disconcert the gay Fadard in the least. He bowed low, took off his cap, and again besought her for a dance.

A burst of laughter greeted his gallantry.

"I am indeed honored, Monsieur," remarked Jenny coquettishly, "but I cannot dance without my father's permission. Go and ask him."

"Ah, Madcap, you are joking. Come."

But she would not listen. She disappeared in the crowd; while the chagrined Fadard addressed another girl, who in a similar way answered: "Go and ask my brother, Monsieur Fadard."

Fadard by this time was furious. Not only was he deprived of a partner, but he evidently was unpopular among the village girls. He resolved to make one more attempt, and turning to Rosalie he asked for a dance.

"With pleasure, Monsieur, upon one condition."

"You mean I must ask somebody's permission, eh?"

"Oh, no. I shall be delighted to dance with you if you will kindly tell me your age."

His age was a tender point with Fadard, and he turned toward the offender with a menacing gesture. Just at that moment Rosalie's elderly husband, who, though henpecked at home, was still the possessor of a brawny pair of arms abroad, quickly settled the matter by administering a severe fistic correction which landed Fadard in a corner, panting for breath.

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After Bruno nearly all of the young men besought her, but Catherine returned the one answer to them: "You must ask my husband's permission."

Firmin, taking her *au serieux*, went to Savin, who by this time was thoroughly vexed and who retorted to the young man not a little harshly.

Savin was most disgusted at his wife's conduct. Instead of profiting by this occasion to settle their differences, Catherine played a disagreeable and unexpected *rôle*. One by one the young men sought him out to ask permission to dance with his wife. It became a painful persecution to him; but when, at length, he divined her intention he decided to make as light of the situation as possible.

"How stupid you are," said he to the young men. "Don't you see that Catherine is only joking you?"

But the farce continued. Each moment brought a fresh applicant and Savin's patience was about exhausted. Besides, he felt that his wife was making a fool of him, and that everybody was amused at the little comedy being acted by Catherine and himself. To be made a laughing-stock for the sake of his charming spouse he could not endure. Everybody felt more or less oppressed by the heat of the room and excited by the wine, and the gamekeeper was by no means an exception. Irritated beyond forbearance, Savin approached his wife and bade her to get ready to go home. Then he added: "You do not wish a reconciliation, it seems. Very well."

"Perhaps you have some complaint to make against me right here," remarked Catherine, with a provoking air.

Savin felt himself the object of a hundred eyes.

"I have no desire to pass for a fool whose wife may ridicule him at will."

"You will always pass for just what you are."

"Catherine, pray do not get in a passion here."

The young woman looked crestfallen and feigned fear. She hypocritically looked to the right and to the left, as though seeking protection and as though afraid of violence from her husband.

"You ought to be ashamed," exclaimed Mademoiselle Faillot, coming up at that moment, "to treat a woman in such a manner."

"Please do not meddle in my affairs, Mademoiselle. I do not accuse you of your little peccadilloes, nor do I ask how you dispense the money intrusted to you for the babes of wet-nurses that you have in charge."

"What! What is that?" shouted the old spinster, turning crimson with rage.

"Mademoiselle, when one has a cousin like Fadard, one need have no uneasiness."

"Ah, indeed. Not so a man who has married the daughter of a criminal."

The young bride now interposed. "Mademoiselle," she said, "you were not invited—at the last moment—to insult my friends."

"Very well. Then your friends should not make any such insinuations."

"Oh, if I had a husband like other husbands," broke in Catherine, "all would go well."

For an instant Savin was beside himself. To intimate that he was disturbing the festivities was more than the mildest of men could endure. Had he not submitted for over two hours to everything disagreeable for her sake? Besides, had not that Mademoiselle Faillot

insulted his wife? And then Catherine—his own wife—had as much as declared that he was responsible for this disgraceful scene.

His brain was on fire with indignation. A few friends approached and endeavored to calm him, but in vain. He stepped toward his wife with a furious gesture. He was determined that she should leave the place. Bruno, observing his threatening attitude, bounded with rage toward the gamekeeper.

"You are a coward!" he fairly yelled, laying hold of Barrau's collar.

Surprised and still more incensed, Savin took a backward step, prepared to grapple with the young fellow. A terrible struggle seemed imminent, for Barrau was a powerful, vigorous man, and L'Ours was not here to defend Bruno this time. But Sidonie was, and the love she had for her hero made her brave to defend him.

"Are you mad?" she cried, as she seized Bruno's arm and dragged him away. Barrau did not follow, as every spectator thought he would. He turned toward his wife, and taking her arm pushed her forward.

"Come," he said, sternly, "let us end this wretched row. We will go home."

For a moment there was silence, but just as the two reached the door Fadard impertinently and loudly exclaimed: "Well, that is what you get for inviting common people."

Scarcely had he uttered these words when he was dealt a hard blow on the cheek by Savin. Smarting with pain, Fadard threw himself upon the gamekeeper, but the latter adroitly warded off his fist and with one movement left his antagonist knocked senseless on the floor.

Once more Barrau, with Catherine by his side, started for home. On the face of one was written sullen determination ; on that of the other bitter despair.

Meanwhile old Jeannille Marselon, her hands crossed on her breast, looked like a being from another world. Her eyes were transfixed and her long, lank, sallow face seemed cold as marble—a face on which the closest observer could not have discovered a sign of sensation or emotion.





CHAPTER X.

CONFESSIONS.

SIDONIE, panting for breath but still determined, did not stop until she had led Bruno behind the little hedge back of the cottage. Then, astonished at her own temerity, she began to be conscious of a feeling of bewildered embarrassment. What would they think of her?

Ah, in this desperate way she had confessed her love before the world—and all for one who did not reciprocate her affection. Oh, the shame of it! What should she do or say?

Until now Bruno himself had not guessed her secret. He had regarded her as a kind and faithful friend—nothing more. At the same time he felt that he had betrayed his secret, and he too was confused and silent. Neither dreamed of speaking, and but this one thought possessed their minds: "I have proclaimed my unrequited love to the world."

About to go away, Sidonie raised her eyes and saw Bruno's sad, despairing face. Pity filled her soul.

"You are unhappy, Bruno," she tenderly said, extending her hand in sympathy, at whose readiness the astonished Bruno burst into sobs. The pretty little cripple's heart sank and tear-drops wet her long lashes.

"Oh, why—why do you love her so much?" she asked bitterly.

Bruno understood the reproach and jealousy that prompted the question.

"Can I help it?" he said impulsively. "Am I the master of my own heart?"

"You are bewitched," she replied, with a shudder.

"Yes, there are moments when I feel powerless."

"You wish, then, you were free from this thralldom? You wish that you had never met her?"

"I do indeed. But since I know her I must love her."

Sidonie was again tempted to go. It was agony to hear him speak thus of another. And yet how cowardly to run away! No, she must summon the courage to endure it.

"My good Sidonie," continued Bruno, "how patient you are—how sympathetic."

"How long have you loved her?" ventured Sidonie.

"Even before she married Savin. But I never dared to tell her so. It was like this, Sidonie: One day I was fishing in the Trinquelin brook and she came down in the neighboring field. Let me see, that was four months previous to the death of her father—and you know as well as I that Monsieur d'Angerolles was never guilty of crime. The accusation against him was all a network of lies."

"Well, well, go on," insisted Sidonie.

"She came into the meadow, as I said, and we joked together over the fence, and finally she said she would try her luck at fishing for a while. We cut some willow rods, and taking the bait and tackle we proceeded along the stream, at intervals casting our lines in little babbling pools and watching, with interest, for a bite."

"And were you successful?"

"No. In the places where I cast there did not appear the sign of a fish."

"And Catherine?"

"Nearly every time her bait was taken, and I helped her unhook at least a dozen fish."

"I tell you, Bruno, she has a sorcerer's power——"

"No, no. She had in her pocket a little bottle of pistachio, belonging to her father, and she put some of the essence on the frog bait, without my knowing it. You know pistachio attracts crabs."

"And were you not jealous of her success?"

"No. I was only ashamed of my failure."

"And what did she say?"

"She only laughed. We went on down the stream, and had a merry time; but, Sidonie, promise that you will never repeat what I tell you."

"Is it, then, so bad?"

"No; but I do not wish it to be known. If it should get back to Catherine she might be offended."

Sidonie, with a sad smile, replied: "Do not fear, I am not a tattler."

"You promise?"

"I promise, Bruno."

"Well, while Catherine was trying to extricate her hook from a stump the overhanging branch to which she was clinging gave way. She slipped and fell into the stream. The water was deep at that place and the current strong. Realizing her danger, I plunged in after her."

"How foolish!"

"Just as I jumped in Catherine rose to the surface, and I seized her dress. We were instantly whirled among the rocks, but I protected her as well as I could,

and by grasping the rocks kept our heads above water as we rushed down stream. In the mad race of the current we were borne along until an enormous rock in the middle of the stream offered me one chance of escape. With great difficulty I managed to climb up on the rock with my burden. Catherine's face was as white as death. In this wood where the stream had carried us I could see on the left an open space, and by picking my way from the big rock to smaller ones that at stepping distances reached to the bank, I was soon able to place her on the cool grass. Presently she revived. Her lids fluttered and then opened, and for the first time I was thrilled by her incomparable beauty."

Sidonie trembled, but she asked him to continue.

"And then, because without my assistance she probably would have drowned, I began to feel very near to her. However, I did not really love her *then*, but she appealed to me. We were drenched, of course, and the heat of the sun was not sufficient to dry our clothing; but we were obliged to wait there until Catherine felt a little stronger. Finally, she rose, looked at me for several seconds, and then silently put her two arms around my neck, and then——"

Bruno abruptly paused, showing himself to be ill at ease. Just then a little leaf falling, irresolutely, from a branch, at last reached the ground. Sidonie's eyes followed its course. A question came to her lips, but she dared not ask it. At the same time Bruno was wondering if he had not said too much. He did not wish to compromise Catherine; but confession is good for the soul, and he could not resist the impulse to give utterance to his pent-up feelings.

"Well, she kissed me twice, and then I knew——"

Again he paused. But an instant afterward he said :
"She went away, leaving me all the fish."

"She was always a little bold, I think," observed Sidonie, wiping her eyes.

"No, do not say that. Would you not have done the same had I saved your life?"

"Yes," admitted poor Sidonie to herself.

"But," pursued Bruno, "it would have been far better for me had she simply thanked me."

"You realize it, Bruno?"

"Yes, for from that time I have been wretched."

"But she is married."

"I know it, my good Sidonie. But still I love her— I love her! But I am only a peasant and——"

"And what does that matter?"

"Oh, I do not know how to address her in language worthy of her or of my love. I can only stupidly say, I love her."

"Ah," said Sidonie, pathetically, "I should not ask for more."

"You—you! Perhaps not. But, don't you see, with her it is different. She is not a peasant by birth or education."

Sidonie suffered keenly. Each word of Bruno's stabbed her tender heart. She felt that she must leave him. She longed to be alone. And yet something held her rooted to the spot. All that Bruno had said in regard to Catherine was but kindred to the feeling the lame girl possessed for him.

"Oh," continued Bruno, "could you but know what it is to love as I do! It is a fever which consumes one! It is torture! Catherine! Catherine! What would I not do for you? For you I would confront a hundred

dangers; for you I would lay down my life; for you——”

“Be silent!” shouted Sidonie, beside herself.

“Who,” he went on, not heeding her command, “can compare with her in loveliness? Who is her equal? I would defend her against her husband! I could kill Firmin did I not know her indifference to him. If at this moment she were to say, ‘Lie at my feet until you die of love,’ I should eagerly obey.”

Unable at this moment to control herself, Sidonie seized his hands, and covering them with passionate kisses, exclaimed: “And I adore you—even as you adore her.”

And turning away she disappeared, leaving Bruno utterly stupefied. When at last he realized the situation, he was overpowered. His words must have seemed so cruel to her.

“Oh, how miserable it all is! Poor, poor Sidonie! How I must have wounded her loyal heart. Oh, why—why could I not have loved her instead of Catherine? We might have been so happy! and now only misery awaits us.”





CHAPTER XI.

TEMPTATION.

BRUNO possessed an ardent poetic nature. In his boyhood he was a day-dreamer. While his village comrades ravaged birds' nests, played at leap-frog, and in other ways distinguished themselves for mischief, he was wandering alone by the river lost in revery. With his feet buried in the cool ripples, he loved to watch the water and study the habits of the finny tribes as they played about him.

He knew where the trout made a home under the rocks, and in the cool summer evenings, with his legs bared to the thigh, he would surprise them in their hiding-places and then a wild chase would follow. How many times would his hand close over some little creature, only to find the next moment that it had slipped from his fingers and escaped among the pebbles.

As he grew into a tall, graceful boy of fifteen, however, he began to think how he could best serve Mother Mathurine, and with a good will he went to work. But most of his leisure time was devoted to trout-fishing and he became an expert angler. Many a fine string of trout bore witness to his skill, and the people of the village looked to him for a supply when a present of that nature was to be made for a *fête* or a social party.

"Bruno's trout always have the best flavor," once

remarked Andoche, "and I do not understand how he coaxes them to bite."

And now Bruno was grown to manhood.

One morning toward the end of November, after a successful expedition, the result of which was a fine trout of enormous size, Bruno was returning home by way of a secluded path through the woods, dreaming of his love for Catherine, when he met the object of his thoughts face to face.

The gamekeeper's wife involuntarily stopped. Bruno's face changed color. At this moment Jacques Percier made his appearance. He quickly passed by, but just as he was about to disappear behind a hedge of walnut trees he turned and saw the gamekeeper's wife still standing in front of Bruno. Knowing Bruno's mad infatuation for Catherine, Jacques fancied he had stumbled upon a rendezvous, and the stupid fellow hid himself behind the trees to watch proceedings.

Catherine approached closer to Bruno.

"You are a brave defender," said she, referring to his action on the day of Suzanne's wedding.

"No, Madame—oh, no. It was nothing. Why do you say that?"

"You know perfectly well, Bruno," she replied. "Ah, if you had only told me your sentiments before my marriage."

Bruno tremblingly whispered: "Do not speak like that, Catherine, for we know not what may happen."

"And why shouldn't I say it? I express a regret. If I only had known then what I know now."

"Ah, then you know——"

"I know that you were exposed to death for my sake that day."

"O Madame, surely you exaggerate."

"At all events, I must admire your heroism. I know that at Suzanne's reception you tried to defend me against the man I have married. And you do not wish me to reproach myself for not having guessed your secret? Alas! the past cannot be changed, but if I were your wife——"

"I beg of you, be silent! I shall go mad."

"Oh, I too am miserable. Still, that shall not prevent me from thanking you."

She extended her hand. Poor Bruno knew not what to do.

"It is not necessary to speak of the little I have done. It was but selfishness on my part."

Catherine, who was silent for a moment, decided to change the subject.

"You have there a fine fish," she said, for want of a better theme.

"Will you not accept it, Madame?"

"Oh, no, my poor friend, no. What should I do with it? Should I not be obliged to tell *him* where I got it?"

Him! That word strangely impressed Bruno. For the second time she had designated her husband without speaking his name, as though the sound were odious to her.

"Never mind," he said. "Take the trout, please. It will give me great pleasure if you will."

But Catherine refused. However, she did not pass on. From time to time she made a motion as though about to speak. Her eyes were brighter than usual, and a flush suffused her cheek. Bruno, supposing she had something important to say, waited patiently. But soon

her expression changed. She looked at the young man long and earnestly. Then, as though renouncing some idea as untimely or impracticable, she briefly said : "Adieu, Bruno."

"Adieu," he returned, with a sigh.

They were about to separate, when, with an impulsive gesture, Catherine turned resolutely and whispered in his ear : "Do you love me, Bruno?"

In answer, Bruno, seizing her hand, muttered a few unintelligible words.

"Tell me, Bruno," persisted Catherine, wishing a coherent reply, "do you love me?"

After all that she had said concerning her husband, and after all the regret she had manifested, this question amounted to a confession. Bruno took her passionately in his arms and rained kisses on her face.

"Then," she continued, with a greater show of reserve, "what if I ask of you something?"

"You have need of me!" cried Bruno in ecstasy. "Oh, speak, Madame; you have only to command. I am eager to do your bidding."

"Even wrong?"

"Even wrong—for your sake."

"Yes, but you say that because you are excited, perhaps."

"Ah, do not doubt me. Believe me, you have only to command, Madame Catherine."

"Well, then," she began, but she stopped short, lost in thought. "Bruno," she went on finally, "go away from me. Leave me at once, for I am utterly miserable."

"No—not until I know what I can do for you."

But Catherine was now unwilling to say another word.

Remorse, or shame, or both had subdued her first wild thought and she was silent. Meanwhile Bruno was urging her to divulge what she desired him to do. So long and so earnestly did he entreat her to speak, that at last she muttered a few words in his ear.

The poor fellow grew deathly white and withdrew a step in terror. His eyes were fixed upon those of Catherine, which glittered like steel. In a moment a cry escaped his lips. Letting the trout fall upon the ground, he lifted his arms and ran across the fields—not knowing what he did.

Quite as troubled as he, Catherine unconsciously extended her arms as though to call him back. But he did not look behind him, and she too soon disappeared in the opposite direction.

What horrible proposition had Catherine made to Bruno? Cannot the reader imagine?

Since the wedding of Jacques Percier and Suzanne, life had been all but unendurable in the pretty little cottage at the corner of the wood. Savin, convinced that his wife no longer loved him, experienced the countless pangs of ruined affection. Catherine had continued to pose as a martyr and he had persecuted her until she was indeed to be pitied. He had brutally resolved to give her cause to complain. He had exacted that the house should be irreproachably neat and orderly, and that the meals should be ready precisely on the hour. The breach had widened day by day. Savin had become more rude and Catherine more irreconcilable. They had addressed each other only in terms of hatred or anger. Nearly every day there had been disagreeable scenes between the two.

“Do not force me to use violence,” said Barrau sav-

agely one day, at which remark Catherine was naturally indignant. Both were at love's antipodes. All peace was at an end, and the more Catherine reflected the more she felt that nothing but her husband's death could bring relief. And having an overwhelming desire to confide in somebody, she had thought of Bruno. But now she perceived how revolting it must have been to his noble mind. The words she had spoken had stunned and driven him away. However, she would not have told Bruno had he not urged, nay begged, her to do so. He had presumed, of course, that she was going to propose an elopement, and while that would have been a serious undertaking, he felt able to brave all for her. Once far away from St. Benoit, he had dreamed of working for Catherine and devoting himself to her happiness.

But when he heard the young woman proposing to kill Savin he could scarcely trust his ears, and we already have seen with what fear he fled from her. Like most of the peasants, Bruno was a very good marksman. He could handle a gun with considerable skill, and the idea had occurred to Catherine to address him just as she would have made the same proposition, under similar circumstances, to Firmin, Fadard, or even to Andoche, if the latter ever had had a thought for anything but the bottle. But Bruno was desperately in love with her and professedly willing to die for her sake. But she did not know that Bruno would sooner cut off his right hand or tear out his heart than lie in wait for an honest man to kill him. Not even for love's sake could he resort to treachery and villany.

Noticing how Bruno received her terrible suggestion, she had been moved to contrition.

"He did right to leave me in dismay, the honest fellow," she had said as she entered the cottage. "I could embrace him for refusing. Who knows but that he may save my life a second time? Brave Bruno!"

Then her proposition in all its hideous blackness recurred to her. Her past life loomed up before her mind's eye and mercilessly mocked and shamed her, and as she meditated—for the first time—she admitted to herself that she had been to blame from the day of the raspberry *fête* up to the time of Suzanne's marriage. The crime she had contemplated now seemed *impish* and terrible. She repented of her wicked thoughts and thanked God that Bruno's conduct had created in her this feeling, otherwise she might never have taken a step toward reconciliation.

Savin was in the forest. She now awaited him with some impatience. Courageously she made up her mind to tender the first advances and bring back her husband's smile. All bickering should cease. The abyss on the verge of which Bruno's flight had arrested her now seemed so dark and horrible. She would a thousand times rather endure the jeers of Rosalie and of the rest than ever again give way to such demon thoughts.

"Ah, well, I will make amends for all the harm I have done," she mentally resolved as she busied herself about the supper.

Barrau had gone to *Pierre qui Vire*. A legend is associated with this place respecting the old Balance Rock. This rock leans against another in such a way as to form a perfect balance, and the story goes that each day when the town-clock at Vaumarin, a little village perched upon the opposite mountain, strikes twelve, the rock turns over three times. But some very precise people

affirm that there is no town-clock at Vaumarin to strike the hour, and so the legend suffers. Others, however, declare that at midnight the rock, possessed of the devil, slowly turns three times. Many excursions are made to the place to watch the mysterious rock, especially by those who are not in the least afraid of goblins. A more lonely, dreary spot on earth could not be found. The rock is situated some three miles from any human habitation, in the midst of a dense and gloomy forest. All the paths leading to it are lined with deep ravines, some of them of frightful depth and filled with a mass of tangled roots and projecting bowlders. Just at the foot of Balance Rock an avalanche of stones has fallen, and these from time to time tumble headlong over the precipice with a thunderous crash. In awful confusion lie the rocks, forming such weird shapes as in the night are enough to fill with dread the bravest heart.

At the bottom of the gorge, in a rock-formed bed, rush the torrents of the Trinquelin River—as though to shun the grewsome spot. But amid these most solitary and desolate surroundings a convent stands on the granite rocks. A misanthropic priest founded it some twenty-five years ago, imposing on its members a code of rules so severe that several died within the first twelve months, and finally the code was somewhat modified. In winter there always is great suffering within its walls, but in the summer-time it is comfortable as well as beautiful.

Savin, walking along the river bank in the thick underbrush, was a prey to bitter reflections. The cold, cheerless day did not tend to lighten his mood. He felt that his whole life was a failure.

"Happiness is but a chimera," he said, "a myth to dream about, but not to realize."

Suddenly a gunshot echoed through the ravine from rock to rock. A ball whizzed past his ear. He raised his rifle and garrisoned himself behind a rock. But at that moment a cunning little doe, wounded and bleeding, fell at his feet with a moan. There was a crackling of leaves. A well-directioned jump landed a man near his victim, which after a spasm or two was dead.

"So it is that rascal," muttered Savin as he stood gazing at Firmin, who stooped to pick up his game.

"You seem to own everything about this region," Savin said ironically.

Firmin, surprised at the gamekeeper's presence, made a backward leap.

"It's no use. You may as well surrender," added Savin sternly.

Firmin was about to make a break for the woods, when Savin raised his rifle.

"If you take two more steps you are a dead man," he coolly warned.

Firmin stopped.

"Perhaps you do not know," continued Savin, "that it is a grave offence to kill the females."

"Well, make your complaint," growled Firmin.

Savin took a step forward, grasped the poacher by the collar, and went on: "To speak candidly, I have more to complain of than the mere loss of a doe. For more than three months now, thanks to your impudence and vanity, I have been deprived of contentment. You have been the cause of my misfortune."

"Who says so?"

"I do, and my word has never been doubted."

"Well, what do you want?" asked Firmin, who, as we know, was not a lion in the way of courage.

"We are alone, entirely alone," pursued Barrau, with awful complacency, "and we will settle this matter right here. You have been paying court to my wife."

"I?"

"You would deny it? You are afraid I will kill you, eh? Well, you have reason to fear. Who will prevent me if I wish to do so? You have been caught poaching—and I am a gamekeeper. There is the proof of your guilt," pointing to the doe. "And I should only have to accuse you of having fired at me. Self-defence would be my plea. What judge would hesitate to acquit me—to congratulate me?"

While speaking Savin held his rifle in readiness. Pale and trembling, Firmin looked about as though invoking aid.

"But reassure yourself," observed Savin, lowering his rifle. "I am not an assassin. You have wounded and disgraced me, however, and I cannot let it pass; so I have a proposition to make."

Firmin breathed more freely. Since Barrau was not going to kill him what had he to worry about? Raising his head proudly, he said: "Well, what is it?"

"They say you have been a *valet de chambre* in the city and know something about the polite doings of society. If that is true, you must know what a duel is. My rifle is loaded and you have ammunition. Load your weapon and we will fight."

The challenge did not seem to frighten Firmin. Surely, he thought, Savin will not insist.

"How do you mean?" queried Firmin curiously.

"We will take position fifty paces apart, and then each may take ten steps forward before firing."

"But that is not a duel," said Firmin solemnly.

"Then choose a better course ; but be quick about it."

"I do not wish to fight at all," replied the poacher.

"Indeed !" exclaimed Barrau, with an effort to contain himself.

"No, I do not. You have mentioned your wife. Well, if she is indiscreet you must take better care of her. I am not to blame, and why should I expose myself to death when I have accumulated a neat little sum to enjoy after working hard for eighteen months ? No, indeed, I am not such a fool."

"You coward ! Heavens ! what a craven you are !"

Firmin's head drooped and he blushed. Then he rallied.

"But," said he, "it would be no duel without witnesses."

"I expected you would find some excuse," said Barrau impatiently. "Perhaps you prefer a duel with swords. Schemer ! You want to get away and then mock me. But that will not work. You must fight."

"I say no. If I wounded you or killed you, I should be branded as an assassin. No, thanks."

"Very well, then ; I shall be obliged to kill you outright."

Savin again raised his rifle, and Firmin was again terrified. Nightfall was not far off, and to be murdered in this ghostly spot was a horrible thought.

It was appallingly obvious to Firmin that he was in Barrau's power. Nothing would prevent the latter from proving his innocence should he carry out his threat.

Approaching Firmin, Savin seized him by the collar and shook him violently

“Will you fight?”

Firmin began to cry for help. Savin, who intended only to give him a thorough scare, now proceeded to administer a rather vigorous chastisement. At length, when he concluded he had taught the lesson to its completion he stopped. But anon he acted as though about to repeat it, Firmin meanwhile fairly quaking with fear. Then, turning on his heel, Savin walked away, leaving Firmin prostrate on the ground.

As soon as the gamekeeper was lost to sight in the woods Firmin, with a muttered curse, seized the doe and went his way. Hatred burned in his breast, and it was depicted on every lineament of his wicked face. His thirst for vengeance was consuming him.





CHAPTER XII.

A VILLAIN'S OFFER.

IRRITATED beyond expression, Savin proceeded homeward, and, as it happened, the first man he met was Andoche—about a mile from St. Benoit.

The blacksmith was a little the worse for liquor, but that was by no means a novelty in him.

"Well, well," he remarked, as he and Barrau came face to face, "I see you have two guns. Have you been capturing somebody?"

"Better than that," returned Savin, whose anger increased the more he recalled his recent experience.

"Oh, with what have you regaled him? For I will wager it is Firmin's rifle."

"Quite right, Andoche. And permit me to add that your friend Firmin is the biggest coward in the country."

"*Mon Dieu!* Have you just discovered that?"

"I did not know that such a craven existed on the face of the earth. No."

"How did you find it out at last?"

"I was down at Balance Rock, and he killed a young doe under my very nose."

"A doe? Indeed that is a crime. And so you got angry and thumped him without further ceremony, eh?"

"No; but I demanded satisfaction."

"*À propos* of what?"

"Of my wife," replied Savin, laconically.

At that moment Jacques Percier, with his usual stupid demeanor, came across the fields and joined them. He heard Barrau's last words, and quite naturally inferred that Bruno also figured in the subject of conversation.

"Good-afternoon, gentlemen," said he, cheerfully.

"Good-afternoon, Percier."

"Your wife!" repeated the blacksmith in surprise.

"Yes. You know she is indiscreet. I do not for a moment believe anything further; but she is imprudent and I am greatly disturbed by it."

"Perhaps you are too hard upon her."

"No, I only ask her love and respect."

"Well," interposed Jacques, with the pompous air of a bridegroom, "we all expect that."

"At all events, I have given the rascal a good lesson."

"And he deserved it," replied Jacques, thinking all the time Savin was speaking of Bruno.

In a voice vibrating with anger, Barrau then related the details of the occurrence at Balance Rock, not, however, mentioning Firmin's name, since Andoche knew of whom he was speaking.

In the mean time, one by one, the little group increased. Other peasants listened to Savin's story. When he had finished Jacques Percier, with his great globe-like eyes fixed upon Barrau's face, foolishly asked: "Then you, too, saw them embrace each other?"

Barrau sprang forward in a frenzy. "Where? When?" he cried.

Andoche slyly touched Jacques's foot, and the latter saw his mistake. But Savin, taking him savagely by

the collar, shouted : " Did you see him embrace my wife ? "

" Don't strangle me," cried Percier. " It isn't my fault if Madame Catherine——"

" Answer me," insisted Barrau, shaking Jacques violently. " Answer me ! Did you see them embrace ? "

" Well, yes ! There ! "

" You must be mistaken," interposed Andoche.

" Let him explain, if you please," requested Savin. " When was this ? "

" After dinner."

" To-day ? Where ? "

" In the walnut grove."

" At what hour ? "

" About half-past three."

" Imbecile ! It is impossible ! "

" Oh, well," said Jacques, with a titter, " just as you say, of course."

This reply exasperated Barrau.

" I tell you it is impossible, and I do not know what should prevent me from punishing you for lying."

" Lying ? " repeated Jacques, with rising indignation.

" Yes, lying ; for I met him myself, and thrashed him, at about four o'clock, at Balance Rock."

Percier was astounded.

" Surely you are speaking of Bruno," said Jacques at length.

" Was it, then, Bruno who embraced Catherine in the walnut grove ? "

Ashamed of his stupidity, Suzanne's husband remained silent for a moment, and then essayed to repair his mistake. But Savin, refusing to listen to his ridic-

ulous explanations, turned angrily away and took the nearest path for his home.

"There are beasts that never ought to open their mouths," growled Andoche, as soon as Savin was out of hearing.

"You mean me?" inquired Jacques.

"No—oh, no. I mean Napoleon I., of course."

"Well, how did I know that everybody was in love with his wife, eh?"

"There will be a great scene when he reaches home, and you will be the cause, you simpleton. *Mon Dieu!* That man told the truth who said that the wicked are less to be feared than fools, because they sometimes keep quiet, while fools never do."

Barrau took long strides, and he breathed as with difficulty. If he had encountered Catherine at that moment, a terrible catastrophe might have been the result. His mind, travelling faster than his limbs, was occupied with reflections that may be summarized thus: "What effrontery! In open daylight to caress a blackguard like that Bruno. They were right in predicting that I should repent of my contract. The coquette! But is it true? Bah! What interest would he have in making up such a story? But perhaps he did not really see it. Perhaps—but no! Jacques is not a liar. Oh, miserable woman! To make herself the laughing-stock of the whole country. But who knows?"

He paused a moment, and then went on: "Like all deceived husbands, I was unable to believe that such a misfortune could come to me, that such shame could enter my home. In all St. Benoit there is not a fireside where they are not mocking me."

Barrau's love and vanity were equally wounded. His

seemed certain. It was now only a question of time, and each day the affection between the two grew stronger.

"Fortunately I am rich, and when she is strong enough I will establish her in a little flower-stall wherever she wishes it to be located."

Then the hot weather came and Eugène redoubled his precautions and care. One day, however, he found a little white spot upon the flesh where the burn had resisted his treatment.

Calling the chief surgeon, he showed him the spot and expressed his own fears in a whisper. "That is nothing," said the surgeon. "Don't worry about it."

He prescribed another application, but on the following day Madelaine was worse. Then Eugène called in consultation the most famous practitioners in all Paris, but in vain.

Twenty-four hours later the young girl died in his arms. Science had failed to save her.

The grief-stricken young physician thus depreciated the art of healing: "For what purpose is science? What matters it how hard one studies or how deeply one delves into scientific research if one can do nothing at a time like this? Science, after all, is only an illusion, and the scientists are humbugs. I do not wish to deceive those who come to me in confidence. I will renounce this so-called science. I will not be a physician."

His decision was irrevocable. But as he was by nature fond of work he could not remain idle or aimless, and accordingly three months later he began the study of painting. After four years in this pursuit he abandoned it to study law. Whatever he undertook he did

well, and his brilliant attainments won for him the respect of every one. But he spoiled everything by always and at every step exacting of himself perfection. The men with whom he came in contact must be irreproachable. To see wickedness and immorality on all sides was terrible to him. The means which men employed to succeed in life disgusted him. Here and there he saw that men of brains often fell short of success, while dull and irresponsible men were on the top wave of prosperity, and these glimpses of life shocked his too sensitive nature.

It is a decided mistake not to take humanity for what it is worth, without stopping to speculate and to moralize. But poor Eugène could not understand the frailty of mankind, and so one day at the age of thirty-five, disillusioned, not knowing what to do, regretting his own unworthiness, but convinced that a man truly honest and pure-minded will strive to make his own life unimpeachable before criticising the foibles of others, he realized how little real good he had done in the world. Visions of the fields and hedges of Morvan came to his mind, and finally he returned to his native town to put all his knowledge and acquirements at the service of his unsophisticated neighbors.

Twenty years later he still dwelt at St. Benoit, where a fellow-citizen could not construct a house, fell a tree, marry a girl, make a will, buy a meadow or undertake a lawsuit without consulting Monsieur Eugène. Always good-natured and generous, he gave himself up unreservedly to all their interests. He cured their wounds, settled their disputes, and advised them in their conduct, and only asked in return a little gratitude.

To say that Monsieur Eugène did not nourish vague

regrets would hardly be true. But he had acquired, with years, a certain indifference to what might have been, which contributed greatly to his tranquillity of mind.

When Catherine entered he asked her to sit down for a moment while he wrote a few lines. Monsieur Eugène's library was an artistic, beautiful room. Rare volumes filled the shelves and exquisite *objets d'art* and unique *vertu* were scattered about in profusion. All these things, however, were quite lost upon the ordinary peasant who came to him for advice. Only a few, like Catherine and Savin, could appreciate his taste, the rest declaring that Monsieur Eugène was *bizarre* and eccentric in this particular. Catherine was too much excited to contain herself, and stepping up to his desk she simply said: "Monsieur Eugène, I want to procure a separation."

"What! Has Savin been unkind to you?"

"Yes, and moreover he struck me on the shoulder. I will not stand such indignities, of course, and besides, we are both unhappy together, so it will be far better if we are separated."

"Was any one present at your quarrel?"

"No."

"That is unfortunate, for witnesses are necessary in such a case. A tribunal would not be satisfied with your word alone."

"Ah! and what if he kills me in the mean time?"

"My dear Catherine, I do not say the law is always agreeable. I only tell you what the law is."

"Then it is impossible for me to free myself from him?"

"No. If Savin confesses that he struck you, that will suffice."

“Then he will confess it, for he desires a separation quite as much as I do.”

“Very well. Have you any money?”

“Why? Do I need much?”

“Certainly.”

“What! must I be subjected to insult, maltreatment, and abuse because I have no money?”

“Alas!”

“*Mon Dieu!* And then the world is astonished because a man is tempted to kill his wife or a woman to——”

“Say no more, Catherine. The words may cost you dear.”

“But how unreasonable!”

“The law provides, however, in cases like yours, that if one of the parties be really a worthy object of judicial assistance, the government will furnish it.”

“Then I shall seek such aid. How can I do so?”

“Wait one minute and tell me, is it true that you permitted Bruno to embrace you yesterday in the walnut grove?”

Catherine blushed and lowered her eyes.

“Be frank with me, Catherine. I am your friend.”

“Well, yes, it is true; but if you only knew the circumstances——”

“Listen, Catherine. You have been very indiscreet, and naturally your husband is mad with jealousy and wounded pride.”

“O Monsieur, do not discuss the question. I understand all you would say; but do you not think I can obtain the assistance you speak of?”

“Candidly, no. You cannot.”

“But why?”

"Because you have been at fault, and inquiries will be made regarding your character, and Savin's as well."

"What of that?"

"Everybody knows Savin and admires him. The magistrates will learn about the raspberry *fête* last summer and its consequences. Besides, you have been most imprudent in your attitude toward Firmin and Bruno."

"But, Monsieur——"

"My child, even if you had the necessary means to push a lawsuit, I should still advise you to desist."

"Why?"

"Because Savin married you under most peculiar circumstances, and you must not forget his generosity and magnanimity in shielding you against the world. Most women would adore such a man, no matter how jealous he was. Such a man never has any difficulty in finding friends to defend him."

"I have nothing more to say, Monsieur. Good-morning," said Catherine, as she hastened with an injured look toward the door.

Understanding her feelings, Monsieur Eugène quietly rose and opened the door for her. Sad and troubled, Catherine went away. As she was passing the inn she heard a loud discussion going on. Andoche's voice could be heard above all the others, but Firmin too was talking loudly, trying to defend himself against their taunts.

"She is pretty, to be sure, Firmin," Fadard was saying, "but you must run a great risk."

"Can it be that you have been to the war?" asked another.

“What a gay cavalier you are,” declared a third.

“May you live to grow old,” cried Fadard, sarcastically.

“Stop!” shouted Firmin, at last, “or you will be sorry.”

“About what?”

“Well, you just wait long enough and he will do you up in the same way, Monsieur; and then we shall see how much there is to your boasted bravery. You are as much of a poacher as anybody.”

“Look out—here comes Savin’s wife.”

“Well, she will shut his mouth quick enough.”

Firmin seized a bottle and brandished it over the head of Nicolas, the last speaker. Andoche interposed, and Firmin, availing himself of the opportunity to escape, ran out of the inn and soon overtook Catherine on the road. She greeted him with an air of hauteur.

“I know what a coward you are,” she said. “I see I can look to you for nothing.”

“I will kill him to-night.”

“Oh, come, you are only boasting.”

“I will kill him, I tell you!”

“And I don’t believe you.”

With a savage gesture Firmin turned and left her.





CHAPTER XIV.

CRIME.

IN her soul Catherine felt quite positive that Firmin would not dare perpetrate the act he had voluntarily promised to do ; still she resolved to keep Savin out that night, if possible. By a grim fatality, however, Savin went abroad on his own account.

When Catherine reached home she found him still sound asleep. Overcome by fatigue, he had dropped into slumber without removing his clothes several hours before. At about five o'clock in the afternoon he awoke with a sudden start, ate a bit of luncheon, and then set to work cleaning his gun, being thus and in other ways engaged until nearly ten o'clock, when without a word he shouldered his weapon and started out of the house.

To Catherine there was something grewsomely suggestive in the departure of the man whom she might never see again alive.

Involuntarily she advanced as though to call him back. But pride, in collusion with baser feelings, conquered her, and the wretched woman lingered with her hand on the door-knob until the sound of his retreating steps had died away and all was still.

Then she sought her bed, but her intention to go to sleep calmly was frustrated. In a short time she began

to weigh her means of defence in case she were implicated in the proposed crime.

The night was characterized by a dry, cold atmosphere. An occasional gust of wind shivered the leaves of the trees, among which the silver gleams of the high-poised moon fantastically played. The stillness would have been continuous but for the shrill interruptions of watchful owls.

Thoughtfully Savin strode on, taking the road which led to the Trinquelin, by a descent into a ravine.

Overcome with a sudden remorse, Catherine left her bed, and opening a window gazed out into the night. After several minutes of unpleasant silence she heard stealthy footsteps approaching, and soon a man's figure appeared to view. The sight filled Catherine with a double sense of horror. She opened the window and in a loud voice cried : " Firmin, go home ! "

But the unresponsive figure only hastened on in the gloom of the oak-trees. Hurrying out of the house, Catherine was bent on overtaking the person ahead of her. As she advanced she gave earnest utterance to the words : " Stop, Firmin ! Abandon your object ! Pray come back ! I am unwilling——"

But the figure had disappeared.

" It is fate," murmured the young woman, who was shaking like an aspen leaf.

Eleven o'clock sounded. As the night advanced Catherine was torn the more by conflicting emotions. Love and despair grappled her heart. The more she thought of Savin as lost to her forever, the greater seemed her love for him. And yet she could not help but feel that he had humiliated her before the world.

At a little past midnight she heard carriage wheels.

The horses' hoofs clattered over the frozen road, and then passing the cottage at the corner of the wood their echoes grew fainter and fainter until they no longer could be heard. Was her husband's wounded or death-cold form being borne away in that late-hour vehicle? Catherine asked herself this question with a cold shudder, as she crouched down beside her chamber window and waited. Perchance to distract her thoughts she began to count the branches of the trees in front of the cottage. But this was a vain and mocking pastime. Every rustle of the leaves to her alarmed senses seemed like the report of a gun. Even the creaking of the floor under her weight as she moved startled her. Once more she went to bed, but only to toss about in dire distress.

The terrible situation appalled her; and the more she considered it, the more atrocious seemed the part she was playing. Visions of Savin her husband, he who had protected her against the world, the man to whom she owed everything—wounded and perhaps dying at that very moment—haunted her. And yet, he had humiliated her. Yes; but what a fearful vengeance—that he should die because of a few vehement words!

Two o'clock. O God! Would the night never pass? Perhaps, after all, he was safe. "Firmin is such a coward! Who knows if he would dare carry out his threat? Why do I torment myself about it? When Firmin sees Savin, he will not dare lift his little finger. God be praised! Firmin is a poltroon—*that* I know, and why should I fear?"

Half-past two.

"How the hours creep! Oh, what if Firmin should attack him from behind? Yes, that is what he would

do—the coward ! He would take him unawares. And I am the cause ! Oh, no, no ! It cannot be !”

Catherine hurriedly dressed herself, determined to seek her husband and end her apprehensive suspense. As she crossed the threshold the air made her shiver and she turned back, and while searching for her shawl she regained a share of her wonted composure.

“After all,” she reflected aloud, “I am foolish. If Firmin, as is probable, becomes frightened and runs home, I shall only get deeper into trouble. At this hour all is settled, one way or the other, but Savin probably is quite safe and uninjured. Firmin is too much of a coward to carry out his threat. And why should I show such an interest, anyway ? Why, indeed ?”

In a nearly tranquil mood she again seated herself at the window. But her tranquillity did not last long. Soon she was assailed by doubts and emotions that brought fresh tears to her eyes.

“But what if he be dead at this instant ? What if he were so far from here that I could not have heard the report ?”

A revulsive paroxysm of grief and remorse made her moan piteously.

“Who knows but that he may be dying with no one near to help him ?”

How terrible is remorse ! Catherine, during those moments of suspense, suffered untold anguish, and when at last she could endure it no longer, she snatched up her wrap and rushed out into the night. The clock tinkled four as she closed the door behind her. Possessed with the one idea of finding her husband, she hurried on, but just as she entered the wood she heard a loud reverberating report.

"O God! I am too late!" cried the distracted woman, as she fell on her knees like a sobbing suppliant. Soon, however, she recovered herself in a measure, but instead of flying to Savin's side, her one thought was to get home as rapidly as possible.

"They must find me alone and asleep," she murmured, "when they come to break the news."

In her confusion it did not occur to her that Savin might be only wounded and that immediate relief might save him. Nor did she dream that anybody could have seen her leave the house—only to return precipitately after the shot was fired, and lock the door, which all night had remained unlocked, behind her.

Mounting the staircase she entered her bed-room and prepared for bed. But her every nerve was on the alert. The ticking of the little clock on the mantel-piece sounded like a cannon in her ears. What a dreadful suspense! Would they never come? In a waiting, listening attitude she seated herself by the window.

"Do I hear footsteps on the walk?" she asked herself. "No, it is only the beating of my heart."

A death-like soundlessness prevailed.

"Oh, what a demon is that Firmin! I would kill him if he stood before me now," she exclaimed.

Five o'clock sounded.

"I hear a step on the pebbles. Thank Heaven! somebody is coming. Good God! how my heart throbs. But I must feign sleep or I am lost. They are knocking at the door. Now to play my part. Oh, Holy Mother, forgive my sin! Remorse—no, it is my conscience—makes me cowardly."

Tremblingly she leaned out of the window and looked.

"God be praised!" she cried. "It is Savin."

Mad with joy, and penitent as Magdalen, she sped down-stairs, drew the bolt, tore open the door, and seizing Savin's arm attempted to lead him within.

"At last!" she breathlessly cried. She noticed nothing strange in his appearance, so delighted was she to know that he was living. The gamekeeper surveyed his wife with unsteady eyes. Any other person would have seen that the poor fellow was wounded. Catherine saw nothing of the sort. His expression was awful in its intensity. Convinced that his wife was the cause of his wounds, he had dragged himself home to avenge himself, should he retain sufficient strength. With super-human effort he had walked the whole distance alone. Blind to everything but the one thought that Savin had been spared to her, she attempted to embrace him.

"Miserable hypocrite!" he shouted. And with a great effort he raised his hand and struck her face.

"So violence and brutality are to be the reward for my penitence. Very well," she wildly exclaimed, her better feelings again overpowered.

Without hesitation she slammed the door in Savin's face and turned the key. Losing his balance, Savin uttered a groan as he fell on the steps with a thud.

Again the young woman mounted the staircase in anger.

"Why do I ever try to conciliate him?" she said to herself. "Twice he has repulsed me when I have tried to bring about amiable relations. But I have finished. Let him strike me again if he dares."

Now that she had seen him safe, and well, as she supposed, her anxiety ceased. She reproached herself for having passed the night in worrying. "What a night

I have passed ! And all for nothing ! But it is over now. I shall never be such a fool again."

By some strange fatality, each time either of them had made overtures to the other some awkward step on the part of the latter had prevented a reconciliation. Reflecting upon this fact, Catherine became the more incensed. Seated upon the edge of her bed she waited. At about half-past six she heard approaching footsteps. Suddenly an awful shriek was given, and then followed the sound of running feet. Catherine listened with every nerve on the alert. Soon a voice said : "Firmin is the man who dealt this blow—the ruffian !"

"What can have happened ?" Catherine asked herself, as she crept to the window and looked out. The heavens away in the east were violet and rose tinted ; while Aurora, beautiful as a dream, was ascending the sky.

"He is dead," said a voice under the window.

"Dead, dead !" repeated Catherine, her eyes dilating with horror. "Merciful heavens ! Not dead ?"

She vaguely comprehended that they were speaking of her husband. A low murmur of voices arose from the spot where the gamekeeper lay ; but the peasants, superstitiously awed, dared not touch the body, and all were speaking in suppressed tones. More than one whispered to his neighbor that Madame Catherine might be able to name the murderer.

"She is a D'Angerolles, you know," added another, significantly.

Every moment some new-comer joined the crowd which surrounded poor Savin's body.

"Come, let us go inside," at last suggested one of the men. But upon trying the door he found it locked,

and knocked loudly. Endeavoring to compose herself, Catherine hastily arranged her dress, and crossed the room toward the staircase. In passing before the mirror that surmounted the mantelpiece she involuntarily looked in the glass. By the dim gray light a shadow seemed to rest upon her face.

"My God! what is it?" she cried in terror.

Lighting a candle, she gazed once more into the little glass. In the glimmering, flickering light she saw upon her livid cheek the traces of a bloody hand. Savin's five fingers, which had been covered with blood from his wound, when he struck his wife, had left their imprint on her face. In a moment more she would have faced the throng with those marks upon her face—by which her husband had branded her as a criminal.

"Look! Madame Catherine has struck a light. She must be coming down," said Mathieu.

"Hadn't we better break it to her gently?" suggested somebody.

"Bah!" replied a woman. "She probably knew all about it before we did."

Meantime Catherine washed away the stains as well as she could, but it seemed to her as though some of them never could be effaced. Down below all wondered why she was so long in coming. At length, after washing her face several times, she descended the stairs.

When she appeared on the threshold, her countenance, mobile and composed, was scrutinized by all, and suspiciously by many. On the doorstep, just as he had fallen, lay poor Savin. Catherine saw him, and a desolate cry escaped her. Falling on her knees she drew his head upon her lap, and with a passionate moan, more of remorse than of despair, she stroked his

cold face. But to the spectators present it seemed but a bit of clever acting, and they manifested signs of distrust of her.

"She is playing a *rôle*," cried Mathieu, sneeringly, but he was in error. For as she now looked upon his pale dead face, so drawn and still, all hatred of her husband disappeared, and her being was scourged by the thought that he had met his death because of her.

Suddenly a wild hope filled her heart. Leaning over her husband's prostrate form, she pressed her ear against his breast.

"He still lives!" she cried. "He lives!"

Realizing that her hope was not in vain, her tears ceased to well up in her swollen eyes.

"Help me," she commanded, as she tried to lift the body in her arms. Several in the crowd came forward to assist her. Her emotion nearly convinced them of her innocence, and only one among them, Andoche, intuitively felt that she was guilty, and yet sincere in her grief.

A mattress was brought from the house and the game-keeper was carefully placed upon it.

"You, Lucien," said Catherine, to a little boy of fifteen who was standing near, "you must run to Quarré and bring Monsieur Morris, the doctor, at once."

When he was removed within, Catherine laved Savin's wounds. A single discharge of lead had entered the chest on the left side a little below the heart. Profuse bleeding had rendered him insensible, but his heart was still beating.

"He is not dead! No, no! He breathes!" Catherine kept repeating. "Listen, George, don't you hear him breathe?"

George was a young student of Trinquelin who possessed no little intelligence.

"Yes, he is living," he declared. So great was her joy at this assurance that all now felt fully convinced of her innocence.

Meanwhile, Andoche, who alone felt undeceived, left the others, determined to follow the trail of blood which indicated the way the wounded man had taken. This trail led him to a little crossway where all signs ceased. At the right a tuft of high shoots had two or three broken branches, and the leaves were scattered. This, then, had been the scene of the assassination. The murderer had posted himself behind the accusing shrubbery and had fired at short range.

Little Lucien returned with the doctor, who at a moment's notice had mounted his horse, anxious to answer so extraordinary a summons. Already the intelligence had spread with that rapidity so characteristic of bad news, and from Quarré to Trinquelin the matter was being discussed.

It was now broad daylight. Just behind the doctor was observed approaching the Chief of Police and one of his subordinates. A great commotion now prevailed. Since the day of the great stampede no such crowd had collected within a radius of twenty miles. From St. Benoit, from Trinquelin, Bordichon, and all the neighboring villages, people had assembled. When Bruno heard the startling news he entered his home completely prostrated.

"Poor Catherine! Poor little woman!" he cried, in his grief. He did not doubt that she was the cause of Savin's death, and he was utterly wretched in the consciousness that his love for her neither increased nor diminished with this discovery.

From all sides rose one cry. All were unanimous in their decision: "Firmin is the guilty man."

When the doctor examined Savin, all looked anxiously for his verdict. At last it came:

"He is not dead, but there is no hope of saving him," he said, soberly.

Catherine gave one heart-rending shriek and threw herself at the doctor's feet.

"Oh, save him! Save him, I beseech you!" she cried in anguish.

"My poor woman, I am powerless. He can live but a few moments."

By this time the gendarmes had entered the yard and were seeking information.

"There are only two men capable of killing Barrau," said one red-haired old gossip who felt it her duty to say something.

"Who are they?"

"Why, Madame Barrau's lovers, of course."

"You mean Firmin?"

"Yes, and Bruno, too."

"What, young Bruno?"

"Why not?"

At this moment little Sidonie appeared. From the instant she learned of the crime she had been a prey to tormenting doubts. Bruno's words on the day of the wedding recurred to her mind.

"For her," he had said, "I would be capable of anything—even of crime."

"Of crime," repeated the lame girl, who, though she trembled like a leaf, possessed an unshaken love for Bruno.

She arrived just in time to hear Bruno accused. A

burning desire to defend him filled her soul, but another feeling kept her silent. The moment had not come to take up his defence. When the accusation became formal, then would be her time.

The conversation was continued, everybody having a word to say on the subject.

"Young Bruno," said Suzanne the bride, "surely he is too honorable to have dreamed of such a thing. Oh, no !"

"That is all very well to say," returned the red-haired gossip, "but when a man is in love with a coquette, he sometimes comes pretty near being a villain."

"You are an old scandal-monger, Madame Calasse, permit me to say," broke in Andoche, who had just returned from his tour of investigation.

"Well, nobody asked your opinion, sir," she retorted.

"No : I give it unsolicited, and nobody here can prevent me, either."

"You scoundrel !"

"You viper !"

"Come, come," interposed Sidonie, indignantly. "Don't dispute in the presence of death. A poor soul is dying."

"Pooh, little simpleton ! You are a great one to talk. You will have enough to do if *you* stand up for Bruno."

"That is my affair," replied Sidonie.

Just then Barrau made a movement. In a sort of convulsion he turned upon his right side.

For a moment the doctor seemed encouraged.

"Perhaps he can name his murderer," said the Chief of Police.

"There is no need of that. We all know," ejaculated one of the women.

This statement was greeted with an indecent burst of laughter from Mademoiselle Faillot, who had come into the house, as it seemed, solely for the purpose of destroying by her innuendos the good impression which Catherine had created.

But the Chief of Police, Monsieur Banastre, was a loyal, intelligent soldier, and was endowed with a tact rarely found among men.

"My good woman," said he to Rosalie, "it is for us to find out the criminal. You need not play the spy."

"What!" gasped Léocadia, "you do not care for our information, then? Why, the police are supposed to protect——"

"Mademoiselle," interrupted Banastre, "do not waste your eloquence upon me. Rosalie wishes to imply that the presumable assassin is Firmin, the valet."

"Certainly," Léocadia answered.

"Ah, well, as yet we do not know. Everybody says it, doubtless everybody thinks it, but I should prefer to hear from the wounded man."

"From the dead!" solemnly remarked Dr. Morris.

The two men made a military salute, and the people superstitiously crossed themselves.

Catherine, at the dead man's side, was weeping bitterly, and praying with a fervor of which she had felt incapable eight days before. It was a sad scene, but Banastre perceived what it was his duty to do.

"Show me the home of Firmin Valeau," he sternly ordered.

Little Sidonie came forward and pointed out the way.

"You see the little red roof there—quite new?" she asked.

“Is that it?”

“Yes, Monsieur.”

“Thanks, little one.—Come, Plagnolles, we must go.”

With regular tread they started down the slope, followed by many curious peasants. Now that Savin was dead, why should they remain longer here?

But by the time the chief and his assistant entered the little enclosure of which Firmin was proprietor, many had lingered behind to discuss the crime by themselves, and to express their opinions without fear of reprimand.





CHAPTER XV.

WHO IS GUILTY?

As soon as Savin's death was announced, Bruno resolved at once to keep away from the house. From the fact that he would be forced, perhaps, to exchange glances with Catherine, he feared lest he might involuntarily accuse her of the deed by a facial tremor or an uncontrollable gesture. But the suspense of waiting for the news at home was maddening. His imagination caused him to suffer the greatest anxiety, and the poor fellow started at every sound, expecting to see Catherine led away by the gendarmes, followed by a mob of curiosity-seekers and mockers. A tender pity filled his heart. What could he do to save her? That was his one thought as he stood by the window.

He remembered having read in the journals how under such circumstances the mob sometimes tried to stone the prisoner. At this idea the blood leaped to his face and his look became savage. To run madly to her assistance was the one wish of his heart, but reason checked him. And then, how could he forsake Mother Mathurine?

Soon, however, he saw the gendarmes take the road leading to his cottage. They knew of his love for Madame Barrau. Perhaps he was suspected and would be

arrested. Cold beads of perspiration stood on his forehead, but he nevertheless experienced a sense of joy. To sacrifice himself for Catherine was perhaps the only manner in which he could prove his love—a joy truly, but a joy half stifled by a revulsion of horror. Such infamy was unworthy of him.

At this moment old Jeannille Marselon, his neighbor, appeared solemnly upon the doorstep. With closed lips, crossed hands, and stern eyes she stood watching the agents of justice as they approached. Then she fixed her melancholy eyes on Bruno. Nothing was more embarrassing than a penetrating glance from the eye of old Jeannille. Bruno felt his lids contract a little under the intense look she gave him, and he could well understand how he would be trembling now had he been guilty of the crime. She lingered for a moment, and then with a steady gait started to join the little procession, which had stopped in front of Firmin's cottage.

Upon discovering that suspicion had fallen upon the valet a strange feeling of disappointment took possession of Bruno. In a burst of jealousy he reproached himself for not having attracted the suspicion of which Firmin was the object.

"He dared to do it, and yet he does not love her as I do. I would die for her," he inwardly said. A consuming, all-absorbing passion, indeed, must have ruled him, that his mind should entertain such reflections. But how little reason was there for jealousy!

The gendarmes did not find Firmin at his house, but they were not surprised. A murderer who, after the deed was done, would quietly remain in his house to be arrested, would be a simpleton. Nevertheless, the crowd was disappointed.

Banastre was about to send Plagnolles to Quarré to telegraph to Avallon, when a little band of men halted in front of the house. Four stalwart fellows were carrying upon a stretcher the body of a man. A cry of surprise was uttered by more than one spectator, for the wounded man was none other than Firmin himself. And in what a state !

His muscles were drawn up in pain, and his face was the picture of defiant suffering. A clamor of voices arose.

“It is he !” cried the bystanders.

Banastre and Plagnolles at once established order, and Firmin was placed in the lower hall of his house.

What could have happened ? How had Firmin been found, and how had he been wounded ? All sorts of guesses were made by the curious crowd, and some most unreasonable ideas were suggested. Rosalie, as usual, had her say.

“Of course, Barrau defended himself, and Firmin must have received a blow in the legs or stomach,” she observed. Upon the same theme others expatiated.

“Or else,” put in Mathieu, “Firmin was ashamed of his cowardice day before yesterday, and, as it was moonlight, he proposed to fight it out, as Savin wished.”

“That must be it,” said Nicolas. “Savin was killed and Firmin is wounded.”

“Oh, but that is not half so interesting,” protested the heartless Rosalie.

“Cruel frog,” exclaimed Andoche, doubtless thinking that a more insulting epithet than that of an aquatic animal could not be conceived—he himself being so averse to water.

“But no,” said a young fellow of sixteen, “Felicien Collas says he has not been shot.”

“What is the matter, then?”

“His leg is broken.”

“How did that happen?” inquired Mathieu, vexed that he had not guessed aright.

“How? How? Go and ask Cremailly of Trinquelin.”

Cremailly was the proprietor of a mill, and just now he held the attention of the listeners. Under the calm but piercing gaze of Jeannille Marselon he related how Firmin had broken his leg under conditions and at a moment when he could not be accused of murder.

“Well, tell us all you know about it,” urged Rosalie.

“Last evening at a quarter to eleven I opened the sluice for the night, and was going to bed, when I heard a noise at the door.”

“’Twas Firmin, eh?” interrupted Mathieu.

“Wait a moment. Don’t be in such a rush. At first I felt too frightened to go to see who it was, but——”

“I believe you,” cried Andoche, rudely interrupting him. “Well, go on.”

“Well, soon I heard my name called.”

“That reassured you.”

“A little, but not much. It was my wife Charlotte——”

“Ah! We all know she isn’t afraid of any man.”

“No, not she. She said, ‘Go and see who it is, goose, or I will get up and go myself.’”

“Then you decided to open the door, of course.”

“Not quite yet; but Charlotte was just about getting up, so——”

“You are a brave and noble fellow, Cremailly. Accept my compliments,” again interrupted Andoche.

"For what?"

"I will tell you on the day of my wedding."

"But you are married now."

"Well, well, stupid, what did your wife do?"

"Oh, she got to the door first and found Firmin lying on the ground with a broken leg."

"How did it happen?"

"I do not know. Charlotte asked him how he came there. You know the mountain, in that locality, slopes to the river. Well, he pretends he tumbled down from above."

"That is a curious explanation."

"But I have an idea," continued Cremailly, in suppressed tones, "that the scamp was surprised by some luckless husband—you know he is a wheedler—and was obliged to save himself by jumping out of some window."

"Yes, but whose window?"

"That I do not know. But as he was found by our door, it could not have been far from us."

"Charlotte could guess better, perhaps, than you."

"Maybe, women are so quick."

"Did he have a gun?"

"Firmin? Yes, it laid at his side."

"Was it loaded, do you know?"

"Yes, two cartridges."

"Well, then it could not have been Firmin who killed the gamekeeper," said Andoche.

At the same moment Monsieur Banastre, after interrogating the wounded man, the bearers of the stretcher and Madame Cremailly, came to the same conclusion. Some seven or eight inhabitants of Trinquelin who had just arrived gave the same evidence as the mill owner.

If the valet's limb was fractured at eleven o'clock in the evening, he certainly could not have fired the bullet which killed Barrau at four o'clock on the succeeding morning.

Being summoned, Dr. Morris declared and demonstrated, without any hesitation, that the accident must have taken place on the previous evening. And so Firmin was declared innocent, absolutely innocent, and was no longer of special interest to the crowd.

Thus evidently thought Jeannille Marselon, for no sooner had the doctor spoken than she left, without having opened her mouth. Curiosity led her to Barrau's house, where the attention of the gendarmes would now probably be directed. The crowd there was still great, for nearly every moment some new-comer appeared, and although a large number had followed the gendarmes to Firmin's house, yet there was no lack of people about poor Catherine's. Jeannille Marselon, with that tranquil and patient manner of people who act without speaking, glided quietly into the room and took her place in the front rank of spectators. Apparently it was of interest to her to see; for when she approached the body she arranged her dress, adjusted her cap, and took up her position with her penetrating gaze fixed upon Savin's face. Then she studied Catherine's countenance, which was troubled and remorseful.

At first, Catherine did not notice Jeannille, but in a few minutes she raised her eyes and perceived the stern, silent old woman watching her. A vague uneasiness seized her. While the woman scanned her countenance, Catherine dropped her eyes. Again something constrained her to look up. The same steady gaze met her eyes. It was insufferable. She rose, ad-

vanced a few steps, and then turned her back upon the woman, but she still felt that awful look penetrating her inward self. She could endure it no longer. A vivid red mounted to her forehead, and she in turn gazed into Jeannille's eyes defiantly. But only for an instant. She put her hand to her cheek. The remembrance of the five bloody fingers made her start aghast. Could it be that the tell-tale marks were still upon her face? Terror chilled the blood in her veins. The flesh seemed to burn in her cheek. It must be—the marks remained visible. That hand! that dreadful hand! Oh, how could she escape it? She covered her face with her hand. The illusion grew so strong she fancied she felt the warm blood oozing through her fingers. A desolate cry escaped her lips. "I am lost," she inwardly cried. "I am lost, and those people are torturing me! That hand! that hand!"

She examined the faces surrounding her. No; all looked kindly and sympathetic. Jeannille alone remained unfathomable—her terrible eyes fixed upon Catherine's features. Unable to bear it, Catherine ascended the stairs and rushed to the mirror. Nothing! The skin was fair as ever. Not a trace of blood was there.

Descending she again kneeled by her husband's body, but her own was shaken by convulsions. She concealed her cheek with her hand, as though afraid the blood-stains would again become visible. Soon the gendarmes reappeared, this time accompanied by the justice of the peace, Monsieur Bérard.

Firmin had triumphantly established his innocence, and Banastre had said to him, a trifle naively: "Ah, well, you can boast of having had a rare escape by so

opportunistically breaking your leg ; otherwise you would now be on the way to Auxerre prison. Everybody was of one mind in accusing you."

"If Firmin is not guilty," said the justice of the peace, addressing Banastre, as they were proceeding to Savin's house, "who is? That is the question."

The Chief of Police only replied by a shrug of the shoulders.

"Have you received no hints which might put you on the track?"

Léocadia Faillot, at that moment, passed by with Rosalie. Monsieur Bérard's question impressed her.

"For my part," she said to her companion, in a voice sufficiently loud for Banastre and Bérard to hear, "I believe that if Firmin did not kill the gamekeeper, it was not because he did not want to do it."

"Why?" asked Rosalie.

"Well, he probably set out for that purpose."

"Take care, Mam'selle Léocadia, somebody might hear you."

"Well, I should like to know what he was doing behind the rocks of Trinquelin at eleven o'clock at night."

"Good heavens, yes!"

"He had a gun, and I believe he was lying in wait for the gamekeeper when his leg gave out. I tell you that was it."

"All the same, it has been proven that it could not have been Firmin."

"Very true. But do you suppose that Firmin, who allowed himself to be boxed on the ears once before by Savin, like the coward that he is, would have had the courage to deal this blow unless somebody had goaded him on?"

Rosalie lowered her voice considerably : " Do you mean Catherine ? "

" To be sure . "

" Well, I did think so . "

" You know she is a D'Angerolles. They say that murder was in the family . "

" Born in the blood, I suppose . "

" *Mon Dieu !* yes . "

" Do the papers say so ? "

" Yes, and the books, too. I have read them myself . "

" Holy Virgin ! "

Rosalie was overpowered by this idea, and Monsieur Bérard, though rather disgusted by Léocadia's manner, nevertheless made a note of it.

" That is no proof, however, that she is guilty . "

" I do not say that she actually fired the bullet . "

" What do you say ? " demanded the justice, peremptorily.

" I—nothing at all, sir, " responded Léocadia, hurriedly and in surprise.

After they reached Barrau's house Monsieur Bérard began to gaze attentively at the old woman's face, that is to say, the face of Léocadia Faillot, who with Rosalie had followed the two officials back to the little cottage at the corner of the wood.

Léocadia Faillot was fifty-eight years old, but she might easily have been taken to be ten years older ; for she belonged to that category of old maids who look as though they never had been young and pretty. Wicked little eyes, a short flat face covered with furrows and wrinkles, a head almost bald, and a long skinny neck were her principal features ; while with these her character was in perfect accord.

The justice regarded her for some time in silence, and then asked Banastre who she was.

"Her name is Mademoiselle Faillot."

"Ah, and what sort of a person is she?"

"I do not know exactly, but there are plenty who do. I would recommend you, among others, to go to a certain Andoche Grignon, a blacksmith by trade. He is generally drunk; but when he is sober, as he is to-day, he is not wanting in good sense."

"You must point him out."

While these words were being exchanged Léocadia was circulating the report that most likely Catherine would be arrested before long.

"Any one must be blind," said she, "not to see that she is guilty. The other person who committed the deed was but the instrument. She planned it, you may be sure."

Everybody knew that Léocadia hated the Barraus. Especially against Savin she had cherished an irrepressible hatred. Now he was dead, and the sum total of her hatred fell upon Catherine. If Léocadia was possessed of a peculiar physiognomy, her moral qualities were equally peculiar. By all she was considered an evil genius. Unmarried and unloved, she had for more than a quarter of a century stirred up strife among the villagers whenever occasion permitted. It seemed as though she were the very incarnation of discord. Turning hot or cold according to will, she influenced the mayor against the curate, the curate against the community, the community against the bishopric. Malicious, hypocritical, and treacherous, she was one day at peace and the next day at war with her neighbors. Evilly disposed and disagreeable, she yet practised a sort of osten-

sible good will, which led people to say : " Well, perhaps she is like the devil—not so black as she's painted."

In the present case, as in all others, she put herself to the front because it was her nature to embroil her acquaintances in rows. Whenever any such occasion as this one presented itself, she had always pushed herself into prominence. She was always ready to advise strange things, and many feared her as a dangerous woman. By her insinuations she hoped to secure Catherine's arrest.

The examining magistrate would demand her presence at Auxerre, and, in her own mind, she would be regarded as of great importance. Moreover, Catherine d'Angerolles was too handsome to come out of this affair unscathed. According to Léocadia, it would require a volume to relate Catherine's coquetries ; and as she was the daughter of an assassin, and had lived unhappily with her husband immediately prior to his death, was it not reasonable to implicate her ? And, in any event, Catherine should suffer if Léocadia could bring it about. And so in less than an hour Mademoiselle Faillot had persuaded nearly every one into her way of thinking ; and Catherine, the daughter of D'Angerolles, and not universally popular, was but feebly defended.

" If Firmin had been unable to prove an alibi, she most likely would have been arrested with him," declared Léocadia.

" But," returned Father Collas, with a sensible exhibition of incredulity, " Monsieur Barrau having been a gamekeeper, it is more than possible that a poacher——"

" A poacher ?" interrupted Léocadia. " Who ? Do you know any one in this community capable of such a misdemeanor ? Pray enlighten us."

This outburst of taunting opposition prompted Father Collas to beat a hasty retreat, and no one seemed equal to the task of answering it.

All sorts of reports concerning Catherine were voiced abroad, and alas! how few were her defenders. Like a flock of sheep the majority followed their leader, and accordingly, when Monsieur Bérard questioned some of them, they echoed Léocadia's opinions.

One man, however, had the courage of his own convictions, and that man was Andoche Grignon, the blacksmith.

"Monsieur Bérard, I cannot say anything about it," said he.

"Why?"

"Because I do not know any more than the rest."

"Still you know that Madame Barrau has been a coquette; that she has flirted a good deal."

"That is to say, she has been fond of amusing herself, yes. But I have known a great many women given to coquetry, and yet who would go no further."

"So you believe the woman is innocent?"

"No, sir, I do not say so, but simply that I believe nothing."

"You have no opinion to give, then. Well, you must admit that she lived at enmity with her husband for five months."

"That is no proof. Here I have lived for seven years unhappily with my wife—Madame Grignon. She is no angel either. But she never killed me."

"Well, one thing is certain: Savin Barrau has been murdered."

"Yes; and this morning, had you asked my opinion, I should not have hesitated to accuse Firmin. And you

see I would have been wrong. At all events, Madame Barrau did not pull the trigger."

"I agree with you."

"But who did?" pursued Andoche, meditatively.

"Do you know Léocadia Faillot, by the way?"

"The universal legatee? Oh, yes."

"Why do you call her that?"

"It is a title I have given her, because she inherits something from everybody."

"What do you think of her?"

"Between ourselves, she is a meddling old woman."

"In what way?"

"When a good man or woman in the village is about to die, Mademoiselle Faillot always appears upon the scene, and makes herself so useful that the poor dying one offers her some token of appreciation, which she accepts, and the moment all is over her tongue begins to wag as usual, maligning the dead as well as the living."

Monsieur Bérard smiled.

"So I call her the universal legatee. For the last twenty-five years she has performed ministrations for the dying. In this way she has earned her living, and to-day, were it not for Fadard, she would be a rich woman."

"Fadard? Who is he?"

"You must know him. The young man who looks like an old man."

"Oh, yes, I know him. Is he here?"

"No, I have not seen him to-day."

"Is he a relative of Mademoiselle Faillot?"

"Her cousin, so she says," replied Andoche, with a funny little gesture.

"How old is he, do you suppose?"

"That is a question which the Lord only knows how to answer."

"Mademoiselle Faillot just now vehemently accused Catherine Barrau."

"Oh, she would accuse her own father, were he living, rather than keep silent. You will see that in less than forty-eight hours she will have the whole town in an uproar."

"How so?"

"She will try to establish two warring factions. That is her plan of attack, and she never fails to accomplish her purpose. I tell you she is a venomous creature."

Andoche was right. Already in the Barraus' yard two parties had been formed. One accused Catherine, and the other, composed of less adherents, proclaimed her innocence. Among those who were ready to defend Catherine were brave little Sidonie, Suzanne the young bride, and her stupid liege, Monsieur Eugène, who gave no little weight to the cause, and some peasants of less importance.

Discussions were heard on every hand.

The justice of the peace did not dare to take sides, but it was evident from the first that the daughter of D'Angerolles would be arrested, and compelled, if possible, to reveal the name of her accomplice.

So matters stood, when all at once an incident occurred which changed the whole aspect of affairs.



CHAPTER XVI.

THE ACCUSED.

SINCE morning Bruno had remained at home, learning the news as best he could from different sources, but not daring to go near Catherine for fear of losing his self-possession.

In his heart he felt that Catherine was implicated. The proposition she had made him in the walnut grove he was certain Firmin, a little later, had accepted. He did not know that the valet was wounded, but thus far free from the charge. At length, a young man from Quarré told him the truth.

"If it is not Firmin, then who is it?" thought he, with the rest. Presently the most harrowing news began to come to him from different persons. Suspicion had now fallen upon Catherine, and the accusations were multiplying against her. Finally, old Mathieu, in passing Mother Mathurine's cottage, shouted out: "It's a pretty sure thing now against Catherine. They will guillotine her fast enough."

Bruno shuddered.

The investigation, then, had so far advanced that the method of punishment was under discussion. Never until this day had the poor fellow measured the greatness of his passion. An overmastering fear came upon him. He could scarcely stand on account of weakness. The blood rushed madly to his head. Catherine—

Catherine accused of murder! The idea that perhaps she was culpable was a torture to him. He ran into his own chamber to prevent Mother Mathurine from observing his condition of mind. Despairing and excited, he threw himself upon the bed and cried aloud. He was nearly crazed with grief.

"What shall I do?" he wailed. "How can I save her? While I am living she must not go to prison."

Yes, but how could he prevent it? Could he fight against the world? Why not carry her into the dense forest surrounding the town, and there conceal her? But no, that was not practical. Intuition made him aware that there was no time to be lost. But what could he do? His mental anguish was lacerating. Suddenly a noise arrested his ear.

"They cannot enter now," he exclaimed, springing to the door. But it was only a cowherd—that was all. Words would fail to describe the suffering of the motionless Bruno.

"Time passes and I must not be idle," he remarked, as a thought flashed through his brain. In a dream, as it were, the little blond head of Sidonie passed before his eyes, and in a moment he seemed to hear her voice saying: "But they will take you for an assassin, an accomplice!"

Meanwhile, at the Barrau cottage the proceedings revealed Catherine's peculiar attitude in regard to the affair. The justice of the peace had found it necessary to interrogate her. With fixed eyes and half-open mouth, she sat as though engrossed in one abstraction. Frequently she raised her hand to her face, as though to brush away a stain. The remembrance of that bloody hand was like an avenging fury. Besides, the presence

of Jeannille Marselon, whose look was mesmeric in its influence, increased her nervousness.

Léocadia Faillot was gossiping as usual.

"She is feigning insanity," said Léocadia. "See her face."

There are people who take pleasure in giving pain. Mademoiselle Faillot belonged to that genus. She derived pleasure in witnessing Catherine's misery.

To the questions propounded by the justice, Catherine answered: "I do not know," or "Oh, if he were *living*! He is my only judge, my husband!"

"Fine words, indeed!" exclaimed Léocadia, derisively.

"Do you confess that you were implicated in your husband's death?"

"No."

"Do you deny it?"

"No."

"Ah, ha! I knew she would pretend she had lost her head."

So malicious did Léocadia look as she made this remark that Sidonie indignantly reproved her. The little cripple had no reason either for loving or defending Catherine, but she was too fair-minded not to take her part when she saw others siding against her with Léocadia.

"You are a wicked woman, Mam'selle Léocadia, a very wicked woman!"

"Well, I am not an invalid or a cripple."

"Who knows?" rejoined Sidonie.

Mademoiselle Faillot shrugged her shoulders, but continued her abuse. Meanwhile the crowd began to threaten Catherine with death. Her only answer was a

smile, and that was irritating in the extreme. At length, the justice decided to arrest her. Just then a young fellow, half drunk, volunteered his opinion in these words: "It was your Bruno Volane who dealt the blow for you, I fancy."

"Bruno Volane," said the magistrate. "Who is he?"

"Oh, another one of her lovers."

"Poor fellow," groaned Catherine.

The justice made inquiries. The crowd, led by Léocadia, demanded that some one should be selected as the culprit. Bruno, for that purpose, seemed as good as any one to them.

Monsieur Bérard heard many accusations, and then, after consulting with Banastre, determined to go to Mother Mathurine's cottage. A crowd of people followed, and upon reaching the house they found Bruno in his room, looking the image of woe.

"He was hiding," sneered some one.

They conveyed him to the gamekeeper's house.

"You are accused," said the justice, "of having killed Savin Barrau."

At these words a sigh of relief burst from Bruno's lips.

"Yes, Monsieur, I killed him."

The moment's ensuing silence was broken by two voices—Catherine's and Sidonie's.

"It is not true! It is not true!"

But it was the little lame girl who continued: "Do not listen, Monsieur, do not listen! He is not capable of it, I assure you. The boy is mad. I will tell you why he accuses himself."

Sidonie spoke with a nervous volubility. Her timid-

ity had fled ; her love alone remained invincible. Bruno, however, maddened by her interference, persisted that he was guilty.

"I tell you I *am* guilty. Be quiet, Sidonie. Why do you defend me ? What do you know about it ?"

The justice gazed intently at Bruno. Jeannille Marselon also closely scrutinized him, and for a moment appeared surprised. The crowd, for a brief interval stupefied, soon recovered itself, and tongues began wagging faster than ever.

"What did I tell you ?" exclaimed Léocadia and Rosalie.

"I have suspected Bruno all along," said another.

Banastre did not for an instant turn his eyes away from Bruno's face. He was puzzled. It scarcely seemed possible that one with such a frank and guileless countenance could commit such a heinous crime.

"It must have been one of the two—Firmin or Bruno," continued Léocadia.

"For Heaven's sake, be quiet !" cried Sidonie.

"Why should I ?" returned Mademoiselle Faillot. "It is you who ought to go and hide yourself. Perhaps you dare say you love him, eh ? He's a fine lover."

"Yes, I do love him. God bless him !" exclaimed Sidonie, with a look of utter devotion.

"I congratulate you. Unfortunately, however, it is Catherine Barrau that *he* loves, and he has done this deed to please *her*."

"That is a falsehood, you slanderer !"

"You shall pay for this," snarled Léocadia.

"We shall see," retorted the lame girl.

"Silence !" shouted Monsieur Bérard, authoritatively. "I cannot permit such wrangling. Keep still, every one

of you, and remember that to accuse a man of murder may cost you dear."

"Well, I never saw such a man as that justice," growled Léocadia.

Monsieur Bérard overheard these words.

"Bring that woman here," he said to Banastre.

Protesting and crying, she was brought forward. Leading her by the arm, Banastre placed her before the justice.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Léocadia Faillot."

"Your age? No lying!"

"Fifty-eight."

"Married or single?"

"Single."

"Well, if you adhere to the opinion you expressed this morning, you formally accuse this young man of assassination."

"But, Monsieur, I am my own accuser," declared Bruno.

"Pray, do not say that," cried Sidonie, touching his arm.

"That is to say, I suppose him to be guilty, since he alone had any interest in killing the keeper," averred Léocadia, in answer to the remark made by the justice.

"So that is your opinion?"

"However," continued Léocadia, "it is very strange that you refuse to believe his word when he confesses the deed. Everybody knows that day before yesterday Bruno and Madame Barrau were seen together in the walnut grove. Savin said he would teach Bruno a lesson. There is not a man in the village who does not know of Bruno's love for Catherine Barrau. But if I

were judge or gendarme it would not be long before I had them both on the way to Avallon prison."

"Do you pretend to dictate to me?"

"No, Monsieur, but——"

"Silence!"

Monsieur Bérard turned to Andoche: "Is this true?"

"In the main, yes."

Sidonie, pale and trembling, at length approached Bruno.

"Why do you say such things, foolish boy? Don't you see that will not save her?"

Then going to Catherine the lame girl said: "Come, Madame, you as well as I have protested that what Bruno declares is not true. But perhaps you know the murderer. Then speak his name. Oh, tell us, I implore you! Bruno did not do this foul deed. Oh, no! He has spent his life in saving others."

Many who heard Sidonie's earnest words agreed with her. Catherine, in turn, made the inquiry: "Was it you, Bruno? No."

"Yes, Madame, it was I."

"Do you swear it?"

"I swear it."

Revolving the past in her mind, Catherine recalled Savin's blow. The criminal must be somebody whom Savin thought was sent by his wife, or he would not have struck at her. And, therefore, Bruno, who had taken to flight at her proposition, perhaps had reconsidered it and resolved to carry it out.

"I am a wretched woman," she said, with a crestfallen look. Presently she once more withdrew to examine her cheek. It was burning, and she imagined that the impression of Savin's fingers was still there.

The justice and Banastre continued in consultation. They were at a loss as to their duty. In the face of Bruno's confession, the other evidence seemed to put upon it a reasonable doubt, but finally they decided to arrest Bruno. In vain did he protest that he alone was the criminal ; that Catherine was innocent.

"Very well. That the magistrate must decide," asseverated the Chief of Police.

For the time being the prisoners were locked up in two rooms in the house. A guard was placed over them, and then the justice went home with Monsieur Eugène. The people likewise sought their homes.

It was now eleven o'clock in the morning.





CHAPTER XVII.

IN THE WOODS.

SIDONIE, the picture of sorrow, was leaning against the trunk of a giant oak crying as though her heart would break. In her merry moods she was never at a loss for friends, but in her sorrow she wept alone.

Her life seemed ended. She felt crushed and soul wounded. However, when Mademoiselle Faillot approached her, and addressed her in mocking terms, Sidonie stanchly defended herself.

“Don't provoke me ! don't provoke me, I say.”

“What ! you threaten ?”

“Never mind. Only go, I tell you !”

“Insolent hussy !” cried the enraged Léocadia.

“Take care !” replied Sidonie. “But for you no one would have believed Bruno. You shall pay for it. The occasion for revenge always comes. And I will find a way to get mine if I have to wait until the day of your death.”

Mademoiselle Faillot did not like to have her death mentioned in such a manner.

“Come, come, don't talk so,” she said, meekly. Then, followed by a number of her satellites, she walked away.

Jeannille Marselon, to whom none paid any attention, had planted herself in front of the gamekeeper's house and was watching the windows of the rooms in which Bruno and Catherine were imprisoned. There she

stood as though turned to stone. As Léocadia, however, approached the house, Jeannille quietly directed her steps toward Sidonie. Touching the lame girl softly on the shoulder, she whispered : "*L'Ours!*"

Sidonie uttered a hopeful, joyful cry. Taking Jeannille's hand she raised it to her lips, saying : " I thank you ! "

Then she rose with a radiant face. In every instance but one, where death or danger had threatened Bruno, Jean Manant—*L'Ours* as he was called—had come to his rescue.

" Why did I not think of him before, Aunt Jeannille ? Do you know where he is ? "

" At Vaumarin. "

" Not so far but that I shall find him. "

The weather had changed. Immense clouds were chasing each other across the heavens. A storm was imminent. But Sidonie knew no fear. Covered with her mantle, a narrow cap on her head, and sabots on her feet, the brave girl fared forth and soon disappeared among the forest trees. Jeannille Marseillon watched her little red skirt until she was lost to view.

" Vaumarin, " she softly murmured. The place was seven good miles away, and the roads were bad. Up hill and down dale for seven miles the little maid must go and come back again, over the mountainous roads. What love, what devotion impelled her ! It was to save the man she adored. If it were in his power Jean Manant would save Bruno. Of that she was convinced. Never before had she attempted such an undertaking. It was not the journey to Vaumarin she dreaded, but the return.

"Well," she murmured to herself, "I will stay there awhile, and Jean can come on at once."

And so the lame girl hobbled on. At about one o'clock she reached a darker and more dismal part of the wood. It began to snow.

"Better this than rain," she thought. At first merry little flakes danced before her eyes, tumbling pell-mell from above and fluttering joyously about in her path. For a while the snow did not impede her course. But when great flakes began to descend, covering her from head to foot, powdering her fluffy hair, entering her mouth and filling her eyes—it was more difficult to proceed.

A melancholy sort of darkness settled around her. She could not see a dozen steps before her. The reader must have been in the depths of a great forest, alone and unprotected, to understand the lame girl's sensations. The steady, silent downfall of snow alarmed her. She imagined all kinds of terrible things. It seemed as though the snow were preparing a shroud for her. She was now suffering intensely with the cold. Time and again she stumbled against the trunk of a tree and for a moment or more was unable to proceed. But she bravely started on again, always with Bruno's fate in her mind.

She stopped to remove her sabots, thinking she might go faster. But fear possessed her and she fancied some one was lying in wait to strike her. "Who then would save Bruno?" was her boding question. Terror increased her pace. She looked to the right and to the left as though expecting to see somebody dart out from the darkness and seize her. The snow, the difficulty in advancing, the cold which was intense, and the damp-

ness which penetrated her clothing, all conduced to render her situation anything but comfortable. And then to be alone in the awful stillness ! Rain falling upon dry dead leaves makes a gentle swish, alike soothing and grateful ; the wind, with its sougning monotone, is companionable ; but the snow, with its mysterious white stillness, suggests a phantom—silent, lone, and solitary.

Shivering and shuddering little Sidonie sped on through the forest. Ere long she became aware that she was approaching Vaumarin. What mattered it to her that her garments were drenched, her feet sore and bleeding, and her hands almost frozen ? She was nearly there. It was for Bruno's sake that she had ventured forth.

While advancing toward one of the cottages she met a peasant with a load of hay.

"Where is L'Ours ?" she asked, in a voice which startled even herself.

"Ah, it is you, little one ! You come from St. Benoit at this hour. Well, well !"

"Where is Jean Manant ?" repeated Sidonie, in a fever of excitement.

"This way, my girl, to the left. Walk down a little way and you will hear his axe."

Without even thanking him Sidonie started away, resolved to find him before succumbing to her fatigue. If she only could see Jean and tell her story, then she would not care what happened to herself. Bruno must be saved ! Soon she was rewarded by hearing the wood-cutter's axe. Jean was wielding it. He was a powerful man, and with one stroke at the heart of a giant tree it trembled and presently yielded to his herculean blows. Around him on all sides lay enormous trees

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He had seen the condition of her garments, and out of solicitude for her had suggested that she discard them for dry ones.

"But why should I change my clothing? At the end of a quarter of an hour I shall be as wet as ever."

"No. You will see. But we must not waste time. Make haste, child.—Wife, give her some dry clothing."

Sidonie submitted. Jean's wife, a bright, alert little woman, with large brown eyes and a delicate skin, contrasted strongly with her husband. "Beauty and the Beast" people called them. Jeanne appeared surprisingly happy. There was not a wrinkle on her brow, and her frank, honest eyes and smiling, tender mouth spoke well for her husband's love and care.

After donning some warm, dry clothing Sidonie ate with a keen relish the homely little repast Jeanne had prepared, for nothing had she eaten since morning.

"Now I am going to fix your feet, little one, so you can walk comfortably," said Jean, when she had finished.

Then he carefully bound up her bruised and bleeding feet in soft linen rags, and Jeanne brought out a pair of soft woollen stockings and rubbers of her own as further expedients of relief. Now, warm and carefully protected against the dampness, the little lame girl regained her fortitude and good spirits, and the reaction gave fresh vigor to her weary limbs.

"Now come, my child," said he, as he put on his coat. After tenderly embracing his wife, he took Sidonie's hand in his and together they started for St. Benoit. As they walked along Sidonie acquainted him with the facts of the case as well as she was able.

"Yes, I agree with you, little one. It surely was not Bruno who killed Savin."

"When I saw he had determined to criminate himself, I was perfectly willing to die," said Sidonie, with a sigh.

"Poor child, I understand," replied Jean, consolingly.

"It was Jeannille Marselon who thought of *you* first."

"Jeannille Marselon!"

"Yes. She said to me: 'Go and find L'Ours, child.'"

"Brave woman! For once in her life she spoke well."

"And so I came. I remembered your love for Bruno, and knew you would help him if anybody would. And you *will* save him, dear, good Jean, won't you?"

"Yes. He shall not go to prison."

"Oh, Jean, how good you are!"

"No, no, child. It is he that is good and noble. Listen. No one knows why I would die for Bruno. But I am going to tell *you*, because you appreciate his worth."

"Oh, yes, tell me."

"Well, listen. Five years ago at the Rouvray fair, while passing the ox-stalls, I received a terrible blow from the horn of a cow, on the face. I was badly hurt and in a sorry plight, when Monsieur Morris the doctor, passing by told me I must have the wound dressed. I made light of it, but the doctor seized my arm and drew me into a little cottage, the nearest one from the spot where we were standing. It was terribly hot weather. You remember—in '81."

"Yes, yes, I remember."

"As I said before, he took me by the arm and led me in. A widow and her daughter occupied the cottage. The latter gave me a drink of cold water, and from that

moment I was not conscious what the doctor was doing to my face. I was too much in love with the pretty young woman to mind what he did. I watched her come and go, and my heart was hers from that moment. You can guess who it was. Yes, it was Jeanne, God bless her !”

Sidonie gave a little gasp. Jean did not realize that he was taking long strides and that the little lame girl was desperately trying to keep up with him. L'Ours continued, not noticing her discomfort :

“ I said to myself, ‘ God never made such a beautiful creature to be mated with a man like me.’ When the doctor had finished I thanked everybody—first Monsieur Morris, then the widow, and finally Jeanne. She smiled at me, but I was so stupid I knew not what I said. But she answered sweetly, and then I went away.

“ Jean, I cannot walk so fast,” interrupted Sidonie.

“ Forgive me, little one. I forget.”

He stopped a moment for Sidonie to rest, and then they started on.

“ I never remembered having seen such eyes as hers before, and such a pretty mouth, dainty figure, and glossy hair. Well, when I went out I forgot all about the fair and returned to the woods.”

Thoroughly exhausted, Sidonie said: “ L'Ours, leave me here. I can go no farther.”

“ Why, little one ?”

“ You must go on to St. Benoit to save Bruno, and I can only hinder you. I cannot walk.”

“ Lean against my arm, child, and you can go better. We are just half way now. Keep up your courage, child, I cannot leave you here.”

They again started.

"Once alone, I dreamed of her at will. I was mad with love."

"Poor Jean! Yes, it is terrible."

"You know—yes. I shall do for you what he did for me."

"What?"

"Was I dreaming or waking, her face haunted me. I lost strength. I could not eat or sleep, and for a year I suffered in silence. Sometimes in the winter, in spite of cold and snow, I would set out for Rouvray. I would watch her window, and when the light was extinguished I would walk back four miles, rewarded by having seen her shadow on the curtain. One night I met Fadard."

"Jean, good Jean, I cannot go any farther. My feet are sinking from under me. Leave me."

"What! Leave you here? Oh, no! Would you die in the snow?"

"It would not matter."

"Don't be foolish. I dreamed of dying once, too, but Jeanne saved me."

Sidonie had stumbled upon a stick, and Jean now stooped down and lifted her upon his shoulder.

"What are you doing, Jean? You will be worn out and delayed if you carry me."

"You are like a bird, little one. Have no fear. We will go faster now."

"Finish your story, Jean," she requested at last.

"Well, time went on, and still I suffered. Bruno noticed it finally, and asked me the trouble—Bruno, who had come to me with all his little troubles. Like a fool, I began to cry. My heart was full and I told him all. The following day he went away on foot to Rouvray, and he saw Jeanne and her mother. I do not know

what he said, but a week later he brought us together. I could only look at her, with wide open eyes. It was Jeanne who first spoke. She told me it would not be so disagreeable to be my wife—she so pretty, so dainty, so winning, and I so ugly, uncouth, and boorish. Well, I asked her if she could really love me—and in three months we were married. And I am so happy ! so happy ! And, Sidonie, my wife—ah, she loves me—ugly and clumsy as I am ; and it is to Bruno, who brought it about, that I owe my happiness. Bruno ! Yes, I would lay down my life for him. I owe him everything.”

Jean would have continued, but Sidonie, exhausted and benumbed with cold, had fallen asleep in his arms.





CHAPTER XVIII.

L'OURS.

AT three o'clock the officers, prisoners, and onlookers arrived at St. Benoit, and the examination soon commenced. It was his first criminal case, and the magistrate began proceedings by questioning everybody right and left in regard to the affair. Jacques Percier related the walnut grove incident. Mademoiselle Faillot was asked her opinion of the mystery, and Andoche was interrogated.

"It is as clear as day," said the magistrate. The two prisoners were then closely questioned. Bruno confessed that he was guilty of the crime, and Catherine did not deny the statement.

"Nothing plainer," said the magistrate, at last, to the justice.

"Permit me to say that one thing mystifies me," returned the justice. "More than one-half the peasants declare the young man innocent."

"Just so, my dear justice. But nevertheless he is guilty."

"And the gamekeeper's wife herself has intimated that we must not believe him."

"Yes, I know that. But she is driven to an extremity by her love for the unfortunate fellow. That is the most interesting part of the affair."

"But, on the other hand, Bruno declares that Madame Barrau knows nothing that he did."

"Of course. They are bent on shielding each other. That proves they are both guilty. Well, we must take them to Avallon.—Banastre, will you see to the conveyance? What time is it now?"

He consulted his watch.

"Ten minutes of four. We must be off in half an hour."

Banastre went in quest of a vehicle for the prisoners, and the others waited for further developments.

Andoche wondered why the officers did not visit the scene of the murder, and so expressed himself.

"Well, what would they see?" disagreed old Mathieu. "The snow has enveloped everything."

Twenty minutes later the conveyance was ready, and Banastre entered the court-room with handcuffs. Those who happened to look at Jeannille Marselon at that moment saw a strange agitation written on her features. On seeing the manacles Bruno made a gesture of revolt. The exclamation, "I am innocent," rose to his lips. Jeannille regarded him with a troubled expression. Then she gazed toward the road leading to Vaumarin, her long fingers moved convulsively. Nervously she directed her steps toward Andoche, the blacksmith.

"I wish to speak to the justice," she said, simply.

For more than a year Jeannille had not addressed a living person, save Sidonie. Her remark created a sensation.

"Jeannille wants to speak, Jeannille wants to speak," all cried in concert. Every one eagerly awaited her next words. She must have something decisive to say or she would not open her mouth, they reasoned.

Andoche whispered to the young magistrate, and

then Monsieur Bérard explained that "Aunt" Jeannille was a strange woman, who had not spoken aloud for months. Out of curiosity the magistrate decided to let her speak.

"You have something of importance to communicate," he said to her.

Jeannille looked at him for a moment and then turned her face toward the forest.

"Here comes Jean—L'Ours," she said.

For a moment they thought she must be mad. But every one was curious. Half the inhabitants of the town, at least, were willing to believe that L'Ours must have been born for the sole purpose of saving Bruno from peril. Consequently to them the arrival of Jean Manant meant but one thing—Bruno should be saved.

A few moments previous to his emerging from the forest L'Ours had awakened Sidonie, and she, now entirely rested, had urged him to go on and let her follow slowly. This he did, and with giant strides he soon came in sight of the conveyance all ready to take to Avallon Bruno, who stood on the doorstep in custody of a gendarme, with an excited crowd around him. In another moment he stood beside Monsieur Bérard, to whom he said: "You must not imprison that man!"

"Why? What have you to say about it?"

"I come to prove to you that Bruno is innocent of this crime, and I am convinced that you will set him at liberty."

The aspect of Jean Manant was not calculated to gain confidence. His dark, swarthy skin, keen black eyes, and brawny arms did not fascinate the average person. And the magistrate was not prepossessed in his favor.



"Listen," said L'Ours. "I am not here to make trouble. But I must defend young Bruno. Neither you nor your gendarmes can take him away if I say he shall not go."

"Insolent——"

"No, I am not insolent, Monsieur. It is the truth. Ask anybody here. Ask Andoche, for instance."

Andoche, leaning toward Monsieur Bérard, said : "A blow from his fist would prostrate any man here. No one would dare stand up against him."

"Yes, yes ; but what are his intentions ?"

"We shall see presently."

Not considering it necessary to discuss with the justice, L'Ours now turned to Bruno, and putting his hand on the latter's shoulder, said : "Do you pretend that you killed the gamekeeper ?"

"Yes ; it was I," replied Bruno, this time less resolutely.

"Well, my boy, you are lying—that is all."

"Jean ! Leave me !" gasped Bruno.

"No, I will not leave you." Then to the officers he added : "Messieurs, it will be worth your while to listen to me."

"Gendarmes, we must enforce the law."

L'Ours cast upon the young magistrate a look of contempt, but the gendarmes came forward.

"Ah, pardon me ! You refuse, then. Very well."

And he assumed a fearlessly defensive attitude.

"But no !" he exclaimed, an instant afterward. "You represent justice. Then *be* just. Your duty is to listen. If you refuse to do so, there is no justice in you."

"Jean," interrupted Bruno, "I pray you, be silent."

"Anything but that, my son. You must hear me speak. I ask only five minutes."

Bruno did not know what Jean meant to say, but he shared in the belief that Jean would save him in spite of himself. He feared that Jean would throw all the responsibility of the crime on Catherine's shoulders.

"Bruno pretends that he assassinated Monsieur Barrau last night," pursued Jean Manant.

"Yes, yes," broke in Bruno, testily.

"Well, then let him reply to three questions that I shall put. At what hour did he commit the crime?"

"At five o'clock in the morning."

"Very well. With what weapon?"

"With my gun, Monsieur."

"Very well. In what part of the wood?"

At this question Bruno hesitated. He but vaguely knew from hearsay the spot where Savin had fallen. But, as we have seen, neither he nor any one else but Andoche could have said positively where the crime had been committed. Bruno, who had supposed that merely his confession would be sufficient, did not know at first what to reply. But he did not dare to hesitate long.

"About two hundred feet from here," he said, with affected calmness.

"You must lead us to the spot."

"Quite true," assented the magistrate. "Yes, you must conduct us there."

The officers had not bothered about going to the spot because the dying man had been found on his own doorsteps. And in this respect they had erred. Everybody at first had regarded Firmin as the assassin, but after Bruno's confession they concluded that they must

have been mistaken. Jean's questions, however, again shifted the evidence from Bruno to Firmin. Among a few the suspicion occurred that L'Ours had asked Bruno to point out the place in the wood in order to save him. Once in the depths of the forest, he might easily find means to free Bruno from his captors and hide him in safety.

Bruno, resolved not to betray any embarrassment or confusion, answered that he would conduct them to the spot. Thereupon he started for the wood, followed by all, and when he had reached the fork in the road he quickly turned down the path to the right. At this juncture Andoche tapped him on the shoulder, saying: "You need go no farther, Bruno: you are not the man who did this deed."

"Ah, then you are convinced?" said L'Ours.

"What do you mean?" demanded Bruno, with a ferocious scowl.

"This morning, Monsieur Bérard, when you questioned me," went on the blacksmith, "I told you that I knew nothing. But now I can affirm that Bruno did not kill Monsieur Savin."

"Why?"

"Because he does not know where the crime was committed."

"And do you know?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"This morning after reaching here I followed the traces of blood from Savin's wound, and finally I came to the place where he received the fatal shot."

"Andoche speaks in this manner," sneered Bruno, "because the snow now has obliterated all marks."

"Well, show us the spot where the bullet was fired," said Jean Manant.

Going about twenty paces farther, at random, Bruno stopped.

"Here is the spot," he boldly asserted.

"What stupidity," muttered Léocadia Faillot to herself. "Why can't they believe a man when he declares himself guilty? What a set of dunces! If I were the justice, do you think I would listen to that bear of a Manant or that soak of an Andoche?"

"My child," said a deep voice behind her, "don't be so positive of that."

It was Jeannille Marselon who spoke, and this was the third time she had opened her mouth to-day. Léocadia answered her with an insolent smile.

Meanwhile Bruno was requested to recount the circumstances of the murder. Then in truth he faltered, realizing how difficult it was to pass himself off for an assassin. So many wretched beings find it impossible to prove their innocence; and behold, here was a man vainly endeavoring to prove his guilt!

"It would be far easier, my boy, to establish your innocence," said Jean Manant, ironically.

"Leave me, L'Ours," returned Bruno, with vehemence. "Do not trouble me any more. Do you think I find it an agreeable duty to confess myself a criminal?"

"You are no criminal.—Am I not right, Sidonie?"

The little cripple answered with a sigh. Her tears made a greater impression upon Bruno than had all the preceding objurgations. The evidence that he was causing her torment, as well as the thought that she was wasting her love on him, stung his feelings. He who could not see a woman or child in danger without

rushing to the rescue was now moved by the poor girl's sorrow. But he soon rallied, and turning he said: "I stood here, and the keeper came from that direction. I took aim——"

Here he paused. Courage failed him. If they had accepted his word and taken him to prison, all would have been well. But to rack his brains to prove his guilt, that was another matter. To devise an infamous scheme to criminate himself before his friends as well as his enemies, that was too much. Speech deserted him.

"Come," said L'Ours, "you do not know how to finish. —Monsieur Bérard, send a gendarme for Bruno's gun, and you will see that it did not serve him last night."

Plagnolles was despatched on the errand. L'Ours turned to the blacksmith.

"Andoche, you will show us where the crime was committed. Come, let us see."

Whereat the young magistrate exclaimed: "Who is conducting these proceedings?"

"Monsieur, I command no one. Andoche is a friend. I ask him to show me the place."

"Well."

"Oh, you are not obliged to come with us. But there is no law to prevent me from going."

The young magistrate could see that he was losing ground. The case was slipping out of his hands. Besides, L'Ours exerted an influence over the peasants around him. Upon first seeing him they became confident that he would save his *protégé*. And matters had so developed that he had nearly gained his point. Nearly everybody regarded Jean Manant with a mingled feeling of fear and admiration. He was the soul of

justice, and he played a noble part in probing the crime to the depths. Taking Andoche's arm he begged him to come. The blacksmith led him down the path to the left of the fork in the road, and then about four hundred yards into the forest. There he pointed out the broken and hanging branches which he had discovered in the morning.

"Certainly it is now easy to perceive how the deed was done," said L'Ours. "The gamekeeper approached from the right, and the assassin stood here——"

Jean in his enthusiasm leaped upon a little snow-bank, as he supposed, but his foot struck against something hard and he slipped. At the same instant a groan as it were from the bowels of the earth was heard. This created a terrible commotion, and some of the spectators in their fear made the sign of the cross. While the others were betraying their alarm, Andoche leaned over the place where the sound was heard. He and Jean together pushed away the snow, and a terrible sight met their gaze. There lay extended upon the ground a man, cold and rigid; while lying on his chest was a huge dog that held him by the throat, his teeth fastened on each side of the windpipe. The strangled man evidently had struggled to free himself, but failing in this he had concentrated his forces in a terrible embrace to throttle his enemy. But the dog was not a coward, and he had preferred to die rather than leave his master unavenged. For the dog was Savin's brave Pata-chaud.

The man whom he had killed had not relaxed his hold, and the courageous beast was nearly choked when L'Ours providentially stepped upon the snow-bank.

"Who is it?" cried Sidonie. "Tell us."

"It is clear that Patachaud has defended his master, and that the dead man was the murderer."

Andoche tried to cover the dead man's face, but he was too late. Léocadia Faillot uttered a cry.

It was Fadard.

A profound, stifling silence ensued. All felt that it was the duty of the magistrate to draw deductions. Finally he spoke.

"Is this not the man we questioned this morning?"

"Yes, Monsieur. It is Fadard."

"He must, then, be the assassin."

"No!" cried Léocadia, "no, Monsieur. He is a relative of mine. I know him intimately."

"Nevertheless, the gamekeeper's dog has choked him to death, to avenge his master."

"The keeper's dog," ranted the woman, "was mad, and threw himself at the neck of my cousin, who was the first person the cur happened to meet."

While Léocadia was speaking the released Patachaud, once more on his feet, made for the house of his master at a limping pace.

Mademoiselle Faillot continued to defend Fadard with violent energy. With a savage movement she pushed away the blacksmith, and falling on her knees beside the dead man lifted his head on her lap and called him tenderly by name. Every one was astounded at her affectionate demonstrations. A strange tenderness was to be detected in her voice and manner, foreign to Léocadia's character.

"I am sorry it gives you pain, Mademoiselle," said Jean Manant, "but he is Monsieur Barrau's murderer."

"I tell you he is not," cried the grief-stricken woman, facing Jean with a glare of hatred.

"I have my revenge sooner than I expected," said Sidonie, inaudibly.

"The dog *must* have been mad. My poor Cyprien! And then to have killed Savin, he must have had a weapon," continued Léocadia. "He had no gun, you see."

"We must prove that," said L'Ours. They hunted around in the snow and soon produced a Lefancheux rifle.

"But that is Barrau's," urged Mademoiselle Faillot.

"Very likely," said Jean, again making a search, this time assisted by Banastre among others.

Sidonie was triumphant, and Bruno now dared to hope that Catherine's innocence would be established as well as his own. Tears of joy sprang to his eyes. All were now searching for the weapon through which Barrau had lost his life. Presently the gendarme Plagnolles returned with Bruno's gun. It was a primitive weapon, both as to appearance and use, and under the breech the copper cap was covered with verdigris. It was not necessary for a man to be a *connoisseur* to observe that this weapon had been idle for more than a month.

"The young man has deceived us," said the magistrate. "This gun has not been used recently."

"Ah, here it is," exclaimed Jean Manant, at this juncture, bringing to light another rifle. This was not so old as Bruno's, but there was nothing modern about it. Jean Manant quickly detected that one of the cartridges was missing. It became more and more evident that Fardard was the guilty man.

"Monsieur Morris extracted the lead from poor Barrau's chest, this morning," said Sidonie. "Let us com-

pare its size with that of the cartridges in the gun just found."

"A good notion, little one," said Jean, suiting the action to the word. The bullet taken from Savin's body exactly fitted the cartridge in the barrel of Fadard's rifle, and his guilt was now fully established.

Léocadia alone attempted to explain the case differently.

"But Savin Barrau forced Firmin to fight with him. Why may he not have pushed Fadard to the wall and made him fire in self-defence?"

"Impossible! Savin was close to the muzzle of the gun that shot him."

Mademoiselle Faillot reflected for a moment and then scrutinized the oak-tree which had been slightly blazed by the shot.

"Pardon me, but between the point where my cousin stood and this spot there must have been quite a distance. It was dark. The two adversaries may have found themselves all at once in close proximity, and Savin may have hidden behind the bushes. Then——"

As she spoke she shook the tree with a feverish hand, and the snow fluttered down, revealing at the fork of one of the branches a bit of half-burned paper. The magistrate stepped forward and took it.

"It is the other wad," said Andoche. "See, it exactly corresponds with the one I just took out."

All was now conclusively proven. The magistrate handed Andoche the two wads, who in turn gave them to Jean Manant to adjust, when Rosalie, who was looking over his shoulder, remarked that the two fragments

of paper looked like parts of a letter, and that the handwriting was Léocadia's.

"Look ! There near the burned part it is signed."

Jean could not resist the temptation to look. Léocadia, having heard Rosalie's remark, advanced to seize the paper ; but Jean, divining her intention, quickly turned it over to the magistrate.

"Monsieur," he said, "this paper should be seen by you."

After silently perusing the scrap, the magistrate turned to the wretched woman.

"This man," said he, pointing to Fadard's body, "was then your son."

Léocadia gave one cry of baffled rage, as she stared at the mocking faces of the crowd around her. The reason for her persistent defence was now understood, and her grief was indeed unfeigned.

When it became known that Léocadia was the mother of Fadard, there was great excitement in St. Benoit. She had posed long as a virtuous woman, and always had been the first to cast a stone at her fallen sisters. And now to know that she was a *declassée* piqued their dull faculties of discernment. Some in their spite seized stones and would have hurled them at her, had not compassion for her grief deterred them. After all, she manifested the possession of a mother's heart in her bosom. That was, perhaps, her only virtue. And as she prostrated herself by the side of her dead son, they turned away, silent in the presence of such anguish.

On the way back to the cottage traces of blood were found here and there.

"Madame Catherine is innocent at last," cried Bruno,

unable longer to restrain himself, as they neared the house. "Thank God! she is innocent."

Sidonie heard these words and staggered as though struck to the heart. No word of gratitude for her noble effort to save him crossed his lips. His one thought was for Catherine.





CHAPTER XIX.

CATHERINE'S LAST WORDS.

FORTY-EIGHT hours later the gamekeeper was buried. L'Ours, leaving the cemetery with Sidonie, passed the cottage of Mother Mathurine.

"Bruno," said he, stopping at the gate, "Madame Catherine wishes to see you."

"Me?" asked Bruno, turning pale.

Sidonie visibly trembled as, noticing his expression, she inwardly said: "How he loves her!"

"What does she want of me?" demanded Bruno, with glowing face, when he had recovered his self-possession.

A wild dream that she, now being free, could love him filled his heart with rapture.

"She wishes to do what is right," replied Jean, "and has a word to say to you."

"Must I go at once?"

"Yes."

"Well, I am ready."

"Come, little one. You must accompany us."

"Oh, no! Why should I go?"

"Because she wishes to speak to you, too."

A quarter of an hour afterward the three entered Catherine's presence.

"Thanks, Jean, for bringing them here ; and you, my young friends, I thank you for coming."

"Now I must go," said Jean. "Good-by—all."

He opened the door, and Sidonie watched him anxiously as he departed.

Catherine asked them to be seated.

She was no longer the charming, gracious woman they had known. Two days of sorrow and shame and remorse had changed her into a sad-eyed woman, and every feature betrayed the suffering she had undergone. She extended her hand to little Sidonie.

"You love Bruno, little one, do you not? Tell me frankly."

"Yes," murmured Sidonie, hiding her blushing face.

"Then, my children, you must be married. My shadow must not stand between you."

Bruno quickly rose.

"No, no, Madame. If I were to marry, I should choose Sidonie. But I shall never marry."

"Why?"

"You know the reason, Madame."

"Because of your love for me?"

Bruno was silent.

"You are wrong. A strange infatuation has governed you, which time and our brave little Sidonie will cure. At heart I am responsible for my husband's death, because I wished it, and I even suggested to two men the idea of avenging me. One of those men was Firmin ; the other was you, Bruno."

Bruno here made an impatient gesture, as though to silence her. But she continued in a low tone : "You see, it was not for the sake of friendship, but to be revenged. But I did not deceive you. You thought me guilty."

Bruno again tried to quiet her.

"Do not deny it, Bruno. When you confessed the crime it was to shield me, for you believed me guilty. And so I was in intent, though I did not perform the deed. All night I waited expecting to hear the shot which should make me free. At last it came. And oh, the agony of that moment!"

A profound stillness supervened. Sidonie, with tearful eyes, gazed at Catherine. Bruno was deeply affected as he saw the once beautiful woman torn with grief and remorse. In gasps she told them of the horrible night she had passed; of the bloody fingers that seemed always to clasp her cheek; of the ghastly discovery at early dawn. All this she told them without trying to palliate her part in it. Her suffering was pitiful.

"God knows how penitent I am, and to him alone can I turn in my anguish and wickedness. Every moment those bloody fingers seem burning into my flesh. That is my just punishment. It will follow me wherever I go. I cannot escape. The blood of my innocent husband will be forever on my head. My hands will wear the crimson stain so long as I live. My cheek will always bear the marks of bloody fingers. My poor Savin's legacy to me is a legacy of blood!"

She paused in a paroxysm of passion.

"And now, Bruno, you understand why I bid you to marry our little Sidonie. She will make you happy. She is worthy of your love.—And when you are his wife, little one, remember and profit by my experience. When I am gone——"

"Oh, do not speak in that way!" protested Sidonie.

"Child, I am going away from here—far away from the frightful spot of my crime. I love my husband—

too late, yes ; but his memory shall be sacred to me even unto death. And now, before I go, let me feel that you two will be happy. You, my child, will be a true wife to him ; but if you are ever inclined to test his love and jealousy, think of me, and be warned in time."

"Fear not. Coquetry is not to my taste," said the little cripple, sadly.

Bruno took her hand, and a smile of perfect love illumined her face.

Together they went away.

The following morning, upon going to the corner of the wood, two peasants found the Barrau cottage deserted. Under cover of the night, Catherine, true to her word, had silently stolen away. No traces of her were ever found, and to this day the people of St. Benoit speak in mysterious tones of her disappearance, and with an air of superstitious gravity tell the story of the gamekeeper's murder.

At twenty-three a broken heart may heal, and one day in the springtime a pleasant little wedding *fête* was given in honor of Sidonie and her devoted Bruno.

Jeannille Marselon was present, and, though she did not speak, for once her face brightened with interest while she watched the lovelight shining in Bruno's eyes as he bent down to kiss the upturned face, and to stroke the golden tresses of his fair young bride.

THE END.

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